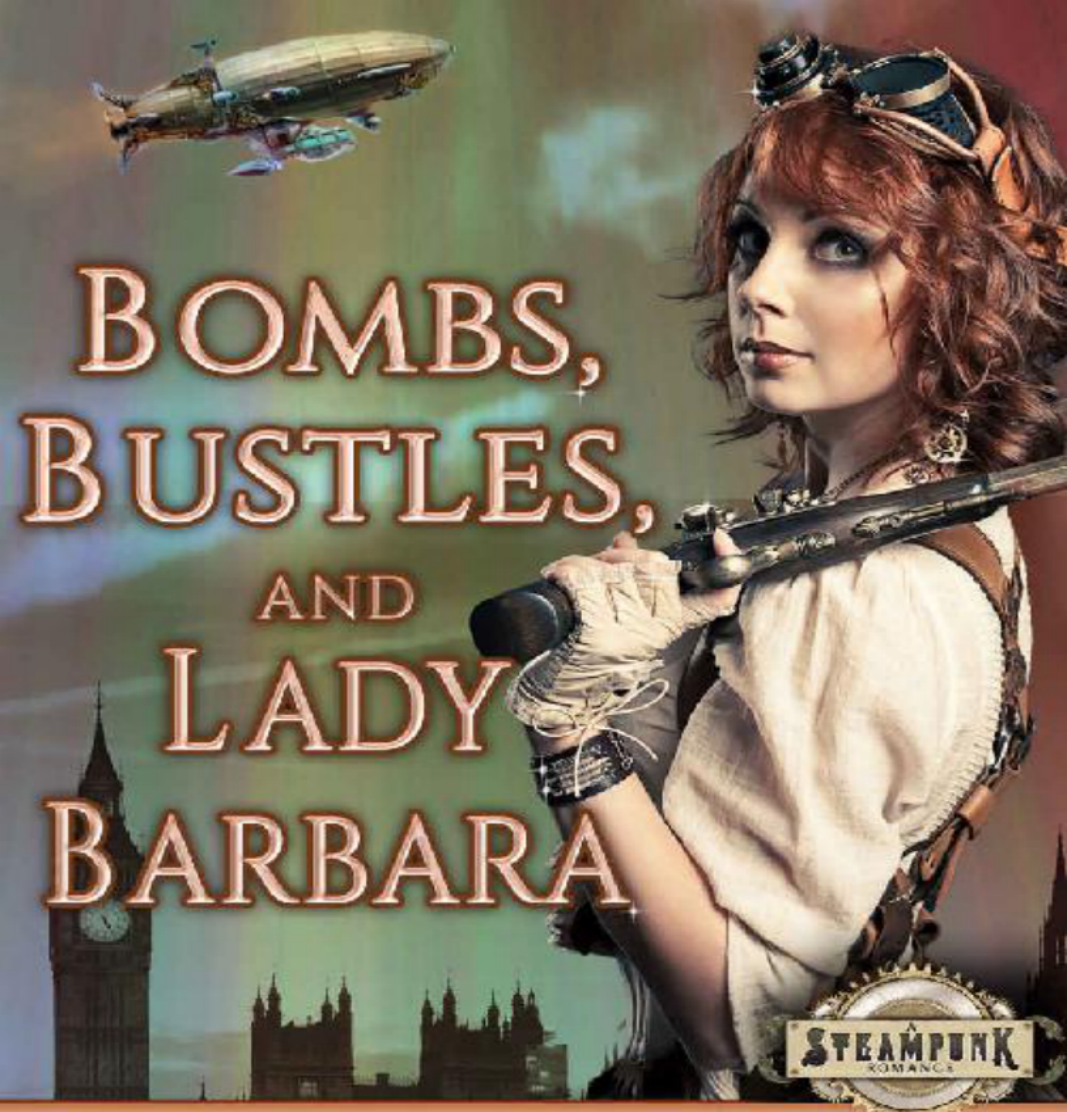


SAHARA KELLY

STRONG WOMEN - VOLUME ONE

Bombs, Bustles, and Lady Barbara

Strong Women – Volume One

Sahara Kelly

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Acknowledgement

When times become challenging, as they have for all of us recently, friends are more important than ever. This series, recounting the adventures of three devoted friends, reflects my belief that with good people in one's corner almost all trials and tribulations can be overcome.

Thank you to all *my* friends—and to you readers, many of whom I am blessed to count as personal friends. These tales are for you, because I know I'd have even more fun in a Steampunk World with all of you beside me. Just be careful with all those switches, buttons, and levers...

(As noted, this story was created recently for serialization, but has now been converted into a complete novel.)

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Chapter One

"*Barbara Regina Treadwell*. Come inside this very moment."

Barbara wrinkled her nose at the shrill yelp from her Nanny. She knew it was inevitable, but sighed anyway. "Just a few more minutes, please, Nannykins? I can see it coming toward us. Look…" she pointed directly ahead. "There it is. See it?"

"I don't care if the dratted thing is going to land next door." The voice turned irascible. "You get in here immediately, young lady. Your aunt and uncle will be here for tea soon, and a fine to-do we'll be having if your dress is covered with soot from those tiles. Your Mama and Papa will be furious."

The little girl on the roof stifled the words about to spill from her lips. Her Mama wouldn't be furious at all, because she was most probably lingering in her bedroom, using more than a few of her little bottles, sitting in front of her mirror and trying to make herself look younger. Barbara had watched occasionally, wrinkling her nose at the various scents and perfumes, the myriad salves, and potions, brushes, powders, and paints. She'd resolved to never fall into that trap, because to waste so much time—well, it seemed wrong.

And Papa? The last time they'd crossed paths in the house, he'd called her Beatrice.

Of course, Papa was very busy because he was an Earl. She'd been told her whole life what an important man he was, and how his business dealings were so crucial that he had to be away, taking care of them a lot. He was very rich, she knew. She'd been told that as well. He would be home at Christmas, and sometimes on her birthday. But there were meetings, even then, and parties to which a ten-year-old was certainly not invited.

Did she miss him? Not really. She had Rowland, her big brother, who—being four years older—knew everything. He answered her questions, patiently helped her to learn to read, and then turned her loose in the Withersham library. She'd been six at the time, and other than what she referred to as "girl-type" lessons with Nannykins, her education had begun with those first moments alone amongst the bookshelves.

She wasn't sure when her fascination with airships had started, but it was probably around the day she found a book on mechanics tucked away behind a Shakespeare tome. The idea that gears could interact and move things caught her attention, and from then on, she devoured everything she could find on the subject.

Shortly thereafter, she decided that she would be an airship pilot

when she grew up. But later she discovered more books, mysteries this time, and changed her lifetime goals. She was going to be someone who solved impossible mysteries. If airships were involved, so much the better.

"Do I have to come and get you, Miss Naughty?"

Barbara sighed, reminded once again by her Nanny's words that it was very difficult being not-quite-ten years old. This spot on the top of her London home was ideal for watching the airships as they drifted to and fro over the metropolis. The large airfield at Rumble Hill was only a few miles to her north, thus she took every opportunity to flee to the attic, clamber out of the wide window and perch on the ridge of the roof, eyes glued to the skies, entranced by the soft purr of the airship engines as they floated so gracefully through the air.

A breeze fluttered the lace of her dress, and she absently smoothed it down, her gaze fixed on the dot that grew larger by the minute. She could almost hear—yes, there it was. The steady drone of the engines. Smooth, a regular throbbing beat that told her already experienced ear that this ship was flying perfectly.

"Barbara, there'll be trouble…I'm warning you."

"Just a few moments more…please? I think it might be a Command ship. It's flying the Air Brigade flag." She held her breath, knowing from her frequent visits to the roof that the direction of this particular airship would bring it very close. Close enough that she might see inside.

"Look, Nanny, look…" She jumped up, grasping the tall railing that rimmed this portion of the slate tiles. "I can see the pilot." She raised her arm, waving frantically. "Oh…the brass…"

Brass rings round the porthole shaped windows flashed reflections of the sun like diamonds, dotted evenly along the length of the flying machine. The cabin itself hung beneath the massive balloon, a sleek bullet shape, anchored by cables and struts and things that Barbara had no name for. All she knew at that moment was that her heart thundered within her young chest.

This was her dream; to fly in that cabin, to look down on the world beneath, passing gently and elegantly out of reach of the smells, the smoke, and the incessant noise that was London.

As if the great machine knew she was there, a little toot of the horn answered her wave.

"Oh my," she whispered, her voice lost to the hum of the engines. It was almost close enough to touch, and yes, there was a man in a smart white cap clearly visible through the front windows. The gold braid on his shoulders glittered as he raised his hand and waved.

At her.

She was struck dumb with excitement, simply clinging to the iron

rail and waving back furiously, her skirts fluttering around her like pink petals caught in a tiny tornado, her hair drifting in the turbulence caused by the passage of the great machine.

So intent was she on the pilot, she didn't notice another face, a boy, looking down on her as they flew past. She didn't see him lift his hand to wave, nor did she see his wistful smile as his gesture was ignored.

She couldn't know at that moment that her destiny was sealed, and her future path delineated by the gentle whirr of the airship engines.

But then again, she was still not-quite-ten years old. Becoming a grown-up seemed like a distant dream.

~*~

Eleven years later, May, Fotheringham Manor, upon the evening of the annual Fotheringham Spring Ball

The ballroom of Fotheringham Manor was doing its best to out-glitter the stars above on this auspicious, clear spring night.

Lady Barbara Treadwell emerged from a door in the hall and walked to the top of the grand staircase, pausing a moment to look down upon the jewelled throng, busy trying to have what they referred to as a *jolly good time*.

Most of it involved the pursuit of an appropriate marriage partner, a scandalous liaison, or gossip, about either of those matters. And gossip probably won out, mused Barbara ruefully. She herself would be pursued, of course. Since the sad death of her parents two years before, she and her brother Rowland, the new Earl of Withersham, had been much in demand. She regularly turned down a dozen invitations a week, and Rowland was beset on all sides by mothers of hopeful debutants. Thus far, he'd managed to avoid all of them without offending said Mamas. Rowland was, his sister knew, extremely adroit.

Now that he had assumed the Earldom, he was also able to chaperone her at affairs like this. Sometimes she attended with friends, of course, but tonight she and her brother had arrived together. She'd only left his side to visit the withdrawing room and ask a maid to loosen her corset just a little so that she could breathe and dance at the same time without fainting.

She sighed and then carefully made her way down the stairs, keeping her back straight—her corset left her little choice—her head high, and her skirts clear of her toes. She was happy with her appearance, a fact which gave her the confidence to calmly descend.

The selection of the pastel green silk gown, trimmed with creamy

lace, had been a wise one. Her brown hair gleamed with chestnut highlights beneath the enormous chandeliers, and her elegant bustle had been much admired. Mostly by the ladies, since the gentlemen tended to appreciate the front view presented by the uplifting boning of her corset. She wasn't gifted in that area, unlike her friend Imelda, but she managed a respectable décolletage, with a little help from a well-engineered garment.

Her eyes scanned the crowd looking for Rowland, but before she'd taken three steps, she heard her name.

"Lady Barbara. Ah, here you are."

Broadsided, she thought. *I never saw her coming.*

An older woman in rather vivid tones of purple bore down on her with clear intent. "I'm so *glad* I found you."

Barbara bit her lip to prevent an improper response.

"May I present Mr Edward Trotter?" Lady Bromley smiled, showing lots of teeth. "He's the son of my good friend Dorothea Trotter and I know he's been *most* eager to make your acquaintance."

She smiled back, as politely as she could, given that this had to have been the twenty-seventh young man she'd been introduced to this evening. She even managed a tiny curtsey, despite the fact that the boning in her damned corset was threatening to stab her each time she moved in any other way than forward or backward. "Mr Trotter."

"Lady Barbara." He bowed correctly, looking as uncomfortable as she felt.

Thankfully, rescue arrived in the nick of time. Rowland came up behind her and took her arm. "I say, Barbara," he began. "Oh, beg pardon, Lady Bromley."

His bow was perfect, and the older woman favoured him with a warm smile. "Lord Withersham. Always a delight to see you looking so well. I was just introducing Mr Trotter to your lovely sister. After all," she gave him a coy grin, "You'll be wanting Treadwell House to yourself soon, I'm sure…you'll be thinking of continuing the line of course."

"Not at all," chuckled Rowland. "At least not for a few years yet. I'd be quite lost without my dear sister to keep me company."

Both Lady Bromley and Mr Trotter withered a little.

"And it's her company I must claim at this moment. Appallingly bad form of me, I know, and I crave your pardon. Will you excuse us? A matter of family business. You'll understand, of course…"

With that flurry of mostly nonsense, the rescue was effected, and Barbara heaved a sigh of relief as Rowland led her away across the ballroom.

"Have I mentioned what an amazing brother you are?" She glanced up at him.

“Not often enough.”

“Remind me of this moment, then, the next time I have the urge to throw something at you.”

“I’m adding it to your bill.” He sighed. “If Mama or Papa had been here…”

She squeezed his arm. “Don’t, Rowland. You are more of a parent to me than they ever were, and there’s only four years between us. Do I miss them? Of course. As, I’m sure, do you. But let’s be honest with each other. They provided room and board and left us titles. There wasn’t much in the way of genuine affection there. I got all that from you and Nannykins.”

“And Imelda and Aurelia.” He glanced down, eyebrow quirking.

“Well, a girl needs friends, you know,” she scolded, her smile robbing her words of any sting. “Anyway, did you really just save me from the perils of Lady Bromley, or was there a real reason for your perfectly timed arrival?”

“I had a reason, menace.”

She laughed at her childhood nickname and shot him a speaking look. “Which is?”

“Standing in front of us.”

Barbara turned her head forward and managed to restrain a gasp. There was a man, an expression of vague interest on his face, his gaze roaming over her from head to foot. Instinctively, she straightened and raised an eyebrow, recognising the uniform. “Why Rowland, my dear. Don’t tell me you’re thinking of enlisting…” she drawled.

Her brother snorted. “No. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. The title thing.”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

The gentleman remained silent, waiting, it would seem, for their banter to end.

“Barbara, this is a good friend of mine. I’d like you to meet Commander Lyle Meredith.” Rowland grinned at the man. “Lyle, this is my sister Barbara. Bit of a nuisance at times, but mostly a bright girl.”

Gritting her teeth, Barbara managed a tight smile and another tiny curtsey. “Commander.” She glanced at the finery adorning his uniform and raised an eyebrow. “Honours from the Battle of Kaltana? I’m impressed and surprised. If you’ll pardon the observation, you don’t look old enough to have served in that action.”

His expression changed slightly, and she felt a tiny shiver of interest as his lips curved into a small smile as he bowed. “And may I say that I am also impressed and surprised to find a young lady who can recognise that medal?”

“I will apologise then, on behalf of my gender, sir. Heroism should

always be recognised, no matter by whom."

Music started up, and the three of them found themselves in a perilous position at the edge of the floor.

Commander Meredith looked at Barbara. "A waltz. Since we are standing here, and I'm sure your brother has many ladies to charm this evening, may I request the honour?" He extended his hand.

Barbara's tiny shiver got a little more definitive as she nodded and accepted it. "Go away, Rowland," she ordered, noting her words brought a quick grin to the Commander's sober visage.

"You are quite forceful when it comes to your brother, I see," he commented, swirling her onto the ballroom floor and into the other couples already beginning the waltz.

"Someone has to be," she quipped, stealing a quick glance at his face. "Do you have siblings, Commander?"

"I do not," he answered. "Mostly I'm thankful. Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like, but not very often. I have other matters to attend to."

"Ah." She nodded, unabashed by his brusque demeanour. "I expect your crew serves quite nicely as family."

To her surprise, he chuckled. "You might be right."

"I amuse you?"

"Lady Barbara. You can have no idea what it's like to command a division of Airfighters. If I had a family like that? Well, I cannot say what I would have done."

Not unsympathetic, and understanding what he'd left unsaid, she let him spin her through a turn. Then she glanced up. "But think what fun your Christmases would have been."

His burst of laughter drew a few surprised looks their way.

"Much better," she approved. "That starchy Commander attitude is expected, I suppose, but really…this *is* a ball."

"I noticed," he replied.

"And if you're here to have a good time, as most of us are, then perhaps you should smile more and unbend enough to enjoy conversation and some dancing."

"I'm dancing with you."

"Indeed you are. And quite well, too. You have my compliments there since my toes are sore from my earlier dances."

"I can understand your ribs being sore from this ridiculous piece of armour you women persist in wearing. But toes? That has to indicate clumsy partners."

She rolled her eyes. "Too busy impressing me. Apparently, men tend to lose track of their feet when they're trying to persuade their partner what a great husband they'd be."

"I see." He stared at her. "You're a catch, then, are you? Besides

being Rowland's little sister?"

For a brief moment, Barbara wondered whether she should take offence at that comment. She would have done from anyone else, but coming from him, she was inclined to treat it differently.

"Of course I am," she grinned without shame. "One of the biggest catches of the Season. Right at this moment, there are at least twenty-seven gentlemen wondering why I'm smiling at you so warmly."

"In that case," he drew her in more closely, about as snugly as he could without causing a scandal. "Let's give those twenty-seven gentlemen something to worry about."

She couldn't help laughing at his words. "I shall stare deeply into your eyes, Commander."

"And I shall stare back. If we both fall down or knock over other couples, it's your fault."

Their evident enjoyment of each other was, as they'd assumed, observed. But not only by many of the gentlemen looking to make a good match.

It was also observed by their mamas.

"Damnation, Aurelia. I thought you told me that Barbara was unattached." Mrs Beaumont Elkins glared at her daughter.

"She is, Mama. I believe she's just enjoying the waltz." Aurelia Elkins sighed, privately wishing she could have shared a dance with the handsome Commander, but happy her friend was smiling so widely.

"You know I had intended she wed your Cousin Dominic. Who is that officer?" The older woman raised her *pince-nez* and perched it on her nose for a closer look at the couple.

"Mama. We have discussed this more than once. Cousin Dominic is not looking to marry. At least not yet. And, to be honest, he's a bit of a wet-blanket. He wants to be a poet, for heaven's sake. Barbara would make mincemeat out of him in a week."

"Disrespectful," snapped her Mama. "But likely true. I'll give you that. However, an AirFleet Officer might be an option for you, my girl. Have you thought about that?"

"Er, no. Not my type at all. Now you leave Barbara alone, Mama. She is my good friend, and…" Aurelia narrowed her eyes, hoping Barbara would forgive her, "I may be lucky enough to snabble one of her titled cast-offs."

"Hmm." Her Mama thought about that. "Oh well. Dominic will have to manage on his own. God knows my sister-in-law has the brains of a flea when it comes to this sort of thing."

"I'm sure she'll be happy to have you help her out, Mama. She should be very grateful for your wisdom."

The dance was drawing to a close, leaving Barbara and her partner

conveniently near where Aurelia and her mother were standing.

Catching Barbara's eye, Aurelia nodded.

"Look, they're coming this way." She straightened. "Barbara…I've been looking for you."

Barbara, her arm linked with the Commander's, smiled and unfurled her fan, waving it rapidly. "It's a crush. No wonder we missed each other." She dipped her head to Mrs Beaumont Elkins. "Good evening, Ma'am. May I take the liberty of presenting my dance partner? This is Commander Meredith." She turned to him. "Sir, this is Mrs Beaumont Elkins and her daughter Aurelia. One of my best friends."

He bowed, the epitome of elegance. "Ladies. A great pleasure."

Aurelia lifted her eyebrow at Barbara as her Mama fluttered in delight. Barbara grinned back from behind her fan.

"Commander, I…" Mrs Beaumont Elkins was cut off as a servant hurried to the Commander's side with a note on a shining platter.

"Your pardon. 'Tis urgent, Sir," he murmured.

The Commander took the note and opened it. His face hardened. "Damnation." The oath was soft, but distinct. He glanced at the group before him. "Forgive me, ladies. I must leave at once." With scarcely a nod to any of them, he spun on his heel and vanished into the crowd.

"The others are going as well," whispered Barbara as she came to Aurelia's side, watching a steady stream of uniforms exiting the ballroom. "D'you think…"

"Another bomb?" Aurelia asked quietly.

"What else would summon every airman from a ball in such a hurry?"

The two girls sighed and exchanged a worried glance, knowing full well that the ball was coming to an end.

And that yet another act of violence had probably occurred in what was starting to look like a campaign of terror against their beloved AirFleet.

Chapter Two

Barbara wasn't in the least bit surprised when Aurelia's card was brought into the drawing room the following morning, closely followed by the young woman herself. "Hullo, I'm so glad you came. I'd have trotted around to your parlour if you'd waited another hour." She rose and hugged her friend.

"All we need is Imelda," observed Aurelia as she removed her gloves and tucked them into her embroidered reticule.

"I'll wager she'll be here soon if her cold has improved."

"She managed to avoid last night's ball, at least." Aurelia settled her skirts. "She's as tired as we are of avoiding eligible young men."

"You know, it's even worse for her. A duke's daughter? The very top of the tree of eligibility."

"I prefer to think of it as a shrub, actually." Aurelia studied her fingernails. "If I do, it brings us all closer together. Otherwise, I find I feel quite lost amongst the lower branches." She sighed.

"Dear idiot," laughed Barbara. "Now. Tell me what you know about last night."

"I know you danced with an absolutely divine specimen of the male gender," Aurelia observed.

"I didn't mean that," sighed Barbara. "Yes, he was lovely to look at, etcetera. I mean about the explosion." Eager to hear her friend's news, Barbara pulled a piece of paper near. If she was going to solve the mystery of these bombings, she needed to keep a record of such conversations.

But sadly, this one was to be devoid of usefulness.

"You know as much as I do." Aurelia tipped her head toward the morning papers, scattered in profusion over a side table, already marked by Barbara's pen at points of interest. "According to those, at approximately ten forty-five last night, a vicious explosion ripped through an airship hangar at Rumble Hill. One airship was completely destroyed, another damaged, although to what extent has yet to be determined. Four brave souls were lost in the ensuing fire."

"Your Papa had no more news?"

"None that he shared with me." Aurelia shrugged. "He may be high up in the ranks of the AirFleet, but he hardly ever talks about any of it. Even if I ask." She held up her hand. "And yes, I did ask last night when we got home. He was just on his way out."

"My goodness. If *he* was called out, then something serious must be happening." Barbara made a brief note and then thought for a

moment or two. “There have already been several bombs,” she mused.

“One defused before exploding, remember,” Aurelia leaned back in her chair. “And two that damaged airships.”

“But this is the first to claim lives, I think?”

Aurelia nodded. “Yes. The others resulted in several thousand pounds of damage and a request for a complete replacement, plus a rear engine and two support struts.”

“I’m so glad you have an exceptional memory, my dear.”

“It comes in handy at times. At others, it can be a dashed nuisance.” Aurelia looked up as they both heard the front door knocker.

“What do you want to wager…”

“It has to be Imelda…”

And sure enough, within moments, another elegantly dressed young lady entered the room.

“Here I am. I know you were expecting me, so hullo and hullo.” Imelda Eastchurch ripped off her gloves and tossed them on the table. “Right then. Bombs. Two of them, possibly, with fatalities. This is getting to be regular.” She looked at her friends. “One might suppose there are people out there who want our fleet paralysed.”

“Hullo Imelda,” grinned Barbara. “How are you feeling?”

Imelda sneezed, grabbing a handkerchief from her reticule. “I’m much better, thank you.”

“It’s a pity you were too sick to attend the ball last night,” Aurelia commented. “You missed all the fun.”

“Bombs are fun?” Imelda frowned.

“No, not that. You missed seeing Barbara here waltzing with Commander Delicious.”

Barbara rolled her eyes. “She’s exaggerating. Besides, it was only one waltz, and he left right after he got the note about the bombing.”

“A Commander? Do you know his division? Is his last name actually Delicious?”

“Imelda, you astound me sometimes,” chuckled Aurelia.

“Look, there are things I need to know. If I’m ever going to be a successful writer, I need details of every single thing that happens. Novels are built on details. Mine involves the Air Brigade arm of the military. So everything I learn could be of immeasurable use.”

Barbara and Aurelia looked at each other, knowing their friend was right. She had begun her first novel with their full support, and they were always ready to render what assistance they could.

Barbara had furnished a lot of the technical details about airships, and Aurelia had added her observations of the military members she’d met. A keen student of humanity, she was excellent at assessing characters within a few moments of meeting them. All of which

helped Imelda's writing.

Rowland had once said that the three of them complimented each other like rhubarb, custard, and heavy cream.

But it was Barbara who was thinking most deeply about the bombs.

The pattern troubled her, and she'd lain awake more than a few nights trying to see if there was any logic to it. She devoured the information provided to the public, but knew there had to be more that was kept behind locked doors.

Anyone who destroyed her precious airships was a monster in her mind. And one who had to be stopped at the earliest possible moment. Her thoughts darted to and fro as Aurelia and Imelda chatted on. Information was crucial, of course. But how to get it? She couldn't just walk into the Ministry and demand their findings.

An idea struck her.

She couldn't, but she would wager someone she knew *could*. Someone she'd only just met,

Commander Lyle Meredith.

It was time to pursue that acquaintance.

~*~

True to her goal, within a few days of the most recent attack, Barbara ordered the carriage and directed the driver to take her to Rumble Hill.

She had barely settled her skirts when the door opened again and Rowland hopped in, rocking the whole conveyance and making her grab for the strap to keep her balance.

"Drat you, brother. What do you think you're doing?" She frowned at him.

He merely grinned back at her. "Why I'm taking the air with my beloved sister." He stretched out his legs comfortably. "Where are we going?"

She thought for a moment, but it was too late to brush his question aside with some casual response. "Well, if you must know, my destination is Rumble Hill."

Her brother glanced at her, curiosity in his eyes. "Really? I cannot begin to imagine why. Do enlighten me?"

"Er…" Many foul and unacceptable curses lingered on her tongue. He really was quite a nuisance at times, interfering with her plans like this. She rapidly improvised. "Well, if you must know, I thought I'd see if I could leave an invitation to dinner for your friend Commander

Meredith." She fluffed her skirts. An unnecessary movement, but it appeared to distract Rowland a little from staring too closely at her face. He was very good at catching her out if she was prevaricating.

However, the more she thought about it, she'd actually improvised a rather good idea.

Rowland seemed to be considering it. "Hmm." He stroked his moustache, a gesture that spoke volumes. He did that when he was turning something over in his mind. "You know, that's a dashed good idea, dear sister. Quite brilliant, in fact." He nodded and smiled at her.

"I do have them now and again," she replied dryly.

"Looking to make a match, are you?"

Caught by surprise, she quickly turned her head and shot him a fierce look. "Absolutely not."

"You could do worse."

"I don't want to *do* at all."

"You'll have to wed someday, Barbara. We both know that."

She stared at him. "Who have you been talking to? Where did all this parental concern spring from?"

For once, his face was devoid of expression as he returned her gaze. "It's always been there, didn't you know? I'm responsible for you, my dear. I'm head of the household and it's up to me to ensure that my family—and that means you—is well provided for. Now and in the future."

Barbara suddenly realised her mouth was gaping, and she shut it with a snap. His words made sense, but were troubling in more than one way. She didn't want to be his responsibility; she was his sister. She'd always regarded them as partners and knew she was blessed to have such a wonderful brother. But this conversation had added a layer of gravity that she'd not considered before.

Silence fell as the carriage made its way out of town and into the green fields and forests that surrounded London.

"Rowland, I love you." She touched his arm. "I'd be lost without you, and I think you understand that."

"I do." He covered her hand with his. "Truly. I feel the same way."

"It's just that I've never realised I was a responsibility as well as a sister." She gave a small chuckle. "I'm not sure I like the sound of it."

"Don't worry about it, love. We will work together. We invariably have." He grinned. "And if you like, I can always speak to Montgomery Custon. He indicated that he was interested in making an offer for your hand. About a week or so ago, I think."

She choked. "That *oaf*? That miserable addlepated *flapdoodle*? The…the…arrogance of him. As if I'd go *near* him, let alone wed him." Words failed her, and she waved her hands in the air.

"Not to worry. I sent him off with a flea in his ear." Rowland was

leaning back, grinning. “But if Lyle Meredith decides you’re of interest, should I send him off too?”

“I…” Barbara paused. She couldn’t deny that the Commander had appealed to her on a variety of levels, none of which she was going to discuss with her brother. Ever.

Thankfully, at that very moment, the carriage pulled into the gateway to Rumble Hill and she was able to redirect the conversation. But the question lingered in the back of her mind like a rather annoying itch.

~*~

The AirFleet facility into which they drove was utilitarian, to say the least.

Since it was the first time she’d actually visited, Barbara leaned forward, staring out of the window at the rows of neat buildings, mostly identical, with lots of Airfighters in various uniforms coming and going from their doorways. It was busier than she’d expected, but the slowing and stopping of her carriage was not.

This would be the checkpoint Rowland had mentioned to her some time ago. Nobody could enter the actual airbase without someone knowing about it.

She hoped that today, with her errand and Rowland’s presence, they would be allowed through. To her surprise, the officer on duty took one look inside, saluted Rowland, and waved them on.

“Er…” She glanced at her brother. “Rowland?”

“I’ve visited a few times. Friends here, AirFleet chaps. Not a very big matter at all.” He waved her potential questions aside. “I wonder where Lyle is…”

“Are we going to be able to get out?” The question sprang into her mind. “I’d rather forgotten that it was likely to be highly secured since the last incident.”

“I should think so.”

“Good.”

As she spoke, the carriage drew to a halt and a young officer opened the door and let down the steps. “Good morning, my Lady.” He held out his gloved hand and helped her alight.

Rowland followed, receiving a salute. “Sir.”

Barbara frowned, but said nothing, merely allowing her brother to lead her toward a large building with impressive columns holding up a small balcony above. “What is this place?”

“It’s the Command Centre,” said Rowland casually. “I believe it’s

the best place to leave a note for Lyle, wouldn't you think?"

"Um, yes."

Since she'd imagined leaving it at the gate, this was certainly more than she'd expected, and she looked around her, trying to absorb and remember everything she saw.

There were desks here and there, lots of doors, and a grand staircase leading up to more doors and several knots of uniformed officers chatting or reviewing the charts and maps that covered the walls.

"Rowland. Good to see you." A man wearing a Lieutenant Commander's insignia hailed them.

"Charlie. Sheer luck we caught you." The two men shook hands.

"Barbara, this is Lieutenant Commander Doyle. Charlie, this is my sister Barbara."

"How lovely to meet you." Barbara smiled and held out her hand. "Rowland has told me nothing at all about you."

The other man grinned. "Isn't that just like a brother?" He took her hand and gallantly dropped a kiss on the back of her glove. "He certainly didn't mention how beautiful you are, my Lady."

"My goodness," she laughed. "I shall have to be careful lest I slip on all this charm…"

"I'm sure there'll be plenty here willing to catch you, Lady Barbara."

The cool tones from behind her made her jump, and she turned to see Commander Meredith looking down at her, a wry grin curving his lips. "Doyle, you may return to your duties. I have matters well in hand."

Doyle sighed. "Aye, Commander." He left with a cheeky grin to them all.

"Good morning, Commander." She kept her greeting to a cool nod.

"Hullo Lyle. Glad to see you." Rowland shot his friend a quick look.

"I deduce this is your first visit to Rumble Hill, my Lady. Would you care for a tour of our Centre here?" He held out his arm.

Barbara was torn. She very much wanted a tour. But she didn't want to appear too eager, or anxious for his company. Lord forbid he find out how much her heart rate had accelerated at the sight of him. He looked even more attractive in the daylight, damn him.

Rowland solved the issue for her. "I have a couple of chaps to find, Barbara. Why don't you take Lyle up on his offer and meet me back here in…say, an hour? Will that be acceptable?"

Barbara glanced at Lyle and managed a smile. "Can you stand my company for that long?"

"I'm not sure. But if you get too annoying, I can always take you

out to the firing range and dispose of you."

Her eyebrows rose. "How delightful."

"I didn't want you to slip on any more charm."

She gave up. Laughing, she slipped her arm through his. "We will meet you here in an hour, Rowland. Or if not, make sure the Commander lets you know where he's buried me."

~*~

Determined not to let the Commander's presence interfere with her quest for information, Barbara allowed him to lead her up the grand staircase.

"Up here is what's known as the Map Room. It isn't a room at all, of course, but these walls are perfect for hanging our maps…"

They walked slowly past large sheets, charts of countries littered with names or comments. Some had tiny red marks on them.

"Are these battle plans?" She paused by one showing several bunches of marks in different colours. "This looks like western India…"

"It is," he answered. "These are actually locations of some of our battalions on the ground." He walked her on to another one. "And here you'll see our AirFleet stations."

A low rumble grew in volume as they stood in front of the map, and she turned to him. "That's an airship. A Fleet 14 Mark Two, if I'm not mistaken?" The building almost shook with the vibrations. "It's above us…good Lord. Can I see it?" She clutched his arm in a very unladylike way.

He grinned. "Come. Quickly, and you'll get a very good view."

The two of them rushed along the corridor and around a curve to the balcony that overrun the entrance. Lyle opened the door and Barbara gasped at the tremendous wave of sound battering them both.

She held her hands to her ears and looked up. Her breath deserted her as she watched the airship slowly pass over them, almost near enough to touch. Everything was so clean, so shiny. The great balloon glittered in the sunlight and the undercarriage, the cabin…all the supports and wires, each part shone brilliantly.

As the engines passed and she was able to remove her hands, Lyle leaned down to her. "You're correct. And that's our newest model. She's named the Helena."

"Oh, how lovely." Barbara shot him a smile. "After the little Princess?"

"Of course." He smiled back, his eyes gentle, sending a tiny ping of

awareness through her.

The Helena gained altitude, and she watched for a while, enjoying the sound of the engines. “I used to watch the airships from my rooftop when I was a little girl.”

“Did you now.” He drew her back inside. “And did you by any chance have a pink dress with ruffles on it?”

She blinked, then frowned. “How could you possibly know that?”

He simply smiled.

She snorted. “Hah. I’m sure all little girls have pink dresses with ruffles. So having settled that question, I would like to ask another.”

“Of course, my Lady.”

Not completely sure if he was being sarcastic or not, she ignored it. “I would like to see the hangars if it’s allowed. And perhaps to actually go inside an airship cabin.” She turned to him, hoping her expression wasn’t too unbecomingly eager. “It’s been a lifetime dream of mine.”

He pursed his lips in thought.

“Hmm…”

She held her breath.

“I shouldn’t, because there are rules about civilians in hangars…”

“Oh, well…”

“But since it’s quiet at the moment, I don’t see why not? It will be a short walk, though…”

Barbara’s heart leapt beneath her silk blouse. “Commander, you have just risen to the top of my most favourite people in the whole world list.”

“Have I?” His arm slid around her waist as he turned her toward a side staircase. “I wonder if there are any benefits to that position…”

The banked heat in his eyes as their gazes met made her blush, and she had to fight to control it as they left the Command Centre past the guard who saluted them smartly and closed the door behind them.

Chapter Three

Commander Lyle Meredith found himself in a bit of a quandary.

He had a delectable young woman on his arm; one who was constantly surprising him with her words, her actions, and her intelligence. Besides that, she was stunning to look at and stimulated not only his mind, but other parts of his body as well.

He was not looking for any kind of entanglement, especially now… the moment when the attention of every single AirFleet member was focussed on finding—and probably exterminating—those responsible for the series of bombings that had haunted their facilities of late.

But here they were, a few hundred yards from the Command Centre, about to enter an AirFleet hangar. And he could almost hear her excitement as she quivered at his side.

"My goodness. It's *huge*."

"You don't have to whisper. It's not a church." He couldn't help grinning as Barbara's eyes grew wider and wider.

It was understandable, of course. The exterior of the hangar gave little indication as to the actual scope of the building, since the roof sloped upward behind trees that had been carefully trimmed to conceal most of the height.

Even so, the balloon itself, the metal clad droplet that held the fuel, was attached outside the hangar. Inside was for creating, repairing and modifying both the balloons and the cabins.

Around them were machines for doing all sorts of things, along with parts of older cabins, frames for new ones, stacks of wood and all the necessary equipment to assemble the latest in Air Fleet technology.

"It's…it's astounding," said Barbara, turning from side to side as she walked toward the centre of the hangar. There were very few people working, and she glanced at him, a question in her eyes. "Where is everyone?"

He glanced at the chronometer sewn into his sleeve. "Briefing. Eleven hundred hours. Most people involved here will be giving reports, going over what's been done, what needs to be done…" he waved a hand around him. "All that kind of thing. It keeps us all on track. We have it twice a week. Almost all the divisions."

"And I would guess it is even more important given the troubles you're experiencing." Her face was sombre.

"Yes." He looked to one side of the hangar, wanting to change the topic of conversation. "Let me show you this." He reached for her,

surprised to find her hand in his as he led her to the far corner, their footsteps echoing on the concrete floor.

"Oh, it's…it's a new cabin?"

He helped her up the temporary steps and drew her inside. "Our latest design."

"How wonderful." She moved around. "It's so big. Bigger than I thought."

"This one will be a troop carrier, eventually. But there are also plans to licence the design commercially." He watched her expression. "Just think, my Lady. You might be able to ride across the ocean in this, or one like it, before too long."

"Oh my," she answered. "Yes, I'd like that. I've often wondered why they're not used for civilians more."

"I can't answer that question, but I'll wager money has something to do with it. It usually does."

"Sad but true." She wandered to the side and ran her hands over the window frames. "Brass? It looks like it. And the glass…a little blurry, I think. Why is that?"

"As I said earlier, this is our latest design." He walked up to her and pointed at the fittings. "All these things are fire retardant. Special glass, specially created brass, and above all, the entire housing, everything you can see from the outside is fireproof and bullet proof as well."

She thought about that. "So it's coated with the same alloy as the balloon?"

His eyebrow shot up. "Um, yes."

"That makes sense," she nodded. "Up until now, it's been vital to protect the balloon. But why not the people in the cabin as well…an excellent solution." She glanced at him. "Does it work?"

"Tests will be underway once this one is finished."

"In other words, you don't know."

"Correct. I don't know." He sighed.

She grinned and touched his arm. "It's all right, Commander. None of us can know everything."

"Really?" He drawled the word as both eyebrows rose, and he fixed his gaze on her.

"Not even me."

He shook his head. "You are a constant source of…either irritation or…I don't know what." He moved to the back of the cabin where several seats had already been installed. "I need to sit down and consider the matter."

She followed him and seated herself beside him. "Should I apologise for being interested? Or for having some knowledge of these matters?"

"No." His answer was firm.

"Thank God for that. I was afraid you were going to be one of those men. You know the type, the ones who would have patted me on the head and told me to go away and be a good girl when I asked to see the hangar. I'm very glad you're not, and thank you for this." She looked around. "It's simply wonderful and beyond belief that I'm actually here, sitting in an airship cabin."

Her gaze returned to his face, and he found himself tangled in a rush of emotions. "You like it?"

She nodded, her eyes on his mouth. "I do." Voice husky, she licked her lips.

That was all it took.

Lyle Meredith, cool and calculated veteran of many AirFleet battles, promptly lost his mind, took her in his arms and kissed her for all he was worth.

~*~

She should have been shocked, horrified at such a liberty.

But his lips were warm and firm and when his tongue invaded her mouth, he tasted of man with a hint of something minty. Delicious. Sensual. And absolutely wonderful.

The few hurried kisses she'd experience in the past were mere bagatelles, compared to Lyle's lips on hers. Somehow she had ended up in his arms, almost in his lap, and even then it wasn't close enough.

Someone made a sound, a moan perhaps. She didn't know which one of them it was, but she endorsed the sentiment behind it. Throwing caution to the winds, she raised her arms and put them around his neck, finding his hair and clutching it as he moved against her mouth, his tongue delving within and exploring every tiny spot.

She returned the favour, and this time knew the moan of pleasure had come from her, her eyes closed and her mind cleared of anything except Lyle. His hand was so warm against her back, burning through the light silk of her garments and searing her skin. Nothing before had prepared her for this moment; a turning point in her life, when she realised exactly what a kiss *should* be.

Finally, they parted, and she opened her eyes to see him watching her, his expression carefully blank.

She straightened, mustering her scattered wits. "Well, that was most pleasant, Commander." She cleared her throat awkwardly.

"Indeed." His smile revealed nothing of his thoughts. "However, I do believe that now you may use my given name."

She chuckled and pulled away from his warmth, loth though she was to do so. "Thank you, Lyle. I will certainly do so in future.

Although it might take a bit of explaining to Rowland."

He stood and held out his hand. "We should return. By the time we reach the…"

Something distracted him, and his head twisted around to look across the hangar.

"*Down.*"

He pushed her to the floor, hard, and fell on top of her.

Squawking in surprise, and a little pain since her knees had taken the brunt of her fall, she opened her mouth to try to protest when the world exploded.

Ears ringing and eyes shut, Barbara clung to Lyle as smoke filled the air and the earth beneath them rolled and shuddered. The noise was unbelievable, the scream of metal as it bent and collapsed, the thunder of the roof falling, the incessant rattle of debris on the top of the cabin where they lay under the seats—it was all too much.

She cried out in terror and Lyle held her as close to his body as he could, sheltering her.

She felt him jerk as more and more debris fell, until finally the cacophony lessened, and she realised, to her surprise, that they were both still alive.

"Lyle," she coughed. "*Lyle,* are you all right?"

He was a dead weight for a few moments and her heart stopped until he groaned and moved, rolling slightly away from her.

"*Oh thank God.*"

Barbara eased herself out from beneath him and touched his face. Relieved to find him warm, she cupped his cheek. "Lyle, can you tell me if you're hurt?"

He opened his eyes, winced, and then coughed. She leaned back, watching him catch his breath.

"*Barbara.* Are you all right? Did anything fall on you?" He sat up, his face full of concern.

She had to smile. "No, no, I have suffered no injury thanks to you. I was more worried about you. I think you took the worst of it." She looked around. "The fixtures fell off the ceiling and onto you. I was convinced your back would be cut to ribbons. Let me see."

Obligingly, he leaned forward. "I can't feel any pains. How about you? Did I hurt you when I pushed you down?"

She shook her head. "No. Bruised my knees, probably, but that's minor compared to what might have happened to us." Satisfied he was all in one piece, she moved into a more comfortable position. "It was another bomb."

"I think that's a safe assumption," he sighed.

"And we're alive thanks to this cabin," she murmured, looking around. "Even the glass held in place. Thank goodness you decided to

show me this particular prototype."

Awkwardly, they both stood, holding on to each other since the floor was now quite crooked and tilted in a way that made walking a challenging adventure.

Not that they could have gone anywhere—the view from the windows was one of utter devastation.

"Oh, Lyle," breathed Barbara. "How terrible. What a disaster. I hope nobody was killed…"

"I can't recall seeing anyone when we came in. It was the briefing time, remember?" His eyes roamed what was left of the hangar.

"That's right," she nodded. "A blessing and a miracle."

"That ship's gone," he looked toward where the airship under repair had been berthed. "And we've lost a lot of our machinery. Damn." He swore, his voice bitter. "Why is this happening? Who could possibly benefit from this kind of destruction? If this was a war zone, I could understand, but it's Rumble Hill, for God's sake. A few miles outside of London." He ran a hand through his hair wearily. "It is getting to be too much."

"Come. Sit. It's going to take some time for them to rescue us. But I know someone will be here to dig us out, so we might as well be comfortable."

"I wish I had my VTV," he groaned. "I left it in the laboratory this morning for recharging."

She knew he was referring to the Voice-to-Voice device military officers were provided with to facilitate communications on the battlefield.

"I think you can forgive yourself for that lapse, Lyle. It's not as if we were expecting to get caught in a bomb blast today, was it?"

He looked at her then, his hand coming up to brush some dust from her cheek. "Barbara, you are quite extraordinary. Any other woman of my acquaintance would be having hysterics right at this moment, not rationalising matters."

She lifted her hand in turn, flicking shards of something away from his shoulders. "Well, that's neither here nor there. What we need to do is to take this event, put it with the others, and see if there's a pattern."

He blinked and stared at her for a few seconds. Then, ignoring the dust and grime, he leaned over and kissed her, pulling her head close to his and spending quite a bit of time enjoying her lips and her mouth.

"Goodness," she said when he released her. "What was *that* for?"

"For being you."

~*~

It took less time than either of them had expected for the sound of shouting voices to reach the cabin, half-buried in rubble. And within thirty minutes they were making their way across what was left of the hangar, helped by many eager hands, prime amongst which were those belonging to Lord Withersham.

"Rowland, put me down, dammit," cursed his sister from his arms. "I'm not injured and perfectly capable of walking on my own two feet."

Rowland's grip tightened as he ignored her protests. "I need to hold you. To know you're alive and well and angry with me. All right?"

Barbara sighed, seeing the fear lingering in his eyes. "All right. But make sure Lyle is looked at, will you? He saved my life, without a doubt."

"Actually, that cabin saved both your lives, but I'll agree that having him there with you was an asset to your safety."

"Gracious of you," she muttered sarcastically.

"I should've known you'd bully him into taking you to see the airships, of course," Rowland said, striding back onto solid ground. "If only you'd stayed in the Command Centre, as I assumed you would."

"Oh, for heaven's sake. This was my first visit to *Rumble Hill*. Did you, of all people, honestly imagine I would not want to see the airships? And I certainly did not *bully* the Commander. I don't think anyone could bully him. But if I could've, I'd be up in the air riding inside one at this very minute." She stared at him angrily.

He simply leaned his forehead against hers. "I don't want to lose you. Ever."

"You won't, love." She sniffled and tucked her head under his chin. "I don't want to lose you either."

Thus reconciled, Rowland put her back on her feet. "There. Now walk a few steps and reassure me you're not hurt."

She chuckled, walked as he asked, then spun, danced a little, and curtseyed. "Happy now?"

"You have a rather unusual sister, Rowland," said Lyle as he caught up with them.

"I certainly do," Rowland grinned back. Then he put his hand on Lyle's shoulder. "And thank you for taking care of her, my friend. We are in your debt."

"Nothing to do with me, except I probably deserve a well-placed boot for allowing myself to be persuaded into taking her over there in the first place."

Rowland shot Barbara a speaking look, which she completely ignored.

"Nonetheless, we're in your debt." He looked around. "It'll take some clearing up, won't it? This mess?"

"It will," nodded Lyle.

"And I expect you have technicians who will be searching for clues as to the nature of the bomb, as well?" Barbara glanced at him. "Have they done so at other sites? If so, do you think they might be able to match anything?"

Rowland and Lyle looked at each other; a moment of what seemed to Barbara to be classic male-to-male commiseration.

Finally, Lyle shrugged. "What you suggest is both logical and reasonable, Barbara. So I'm sure the answer must be yes, but I cannot say I have any personal knowledge of where that investigation lies at the present time."

She opened her mouth to argue, but then became aware of the vast numbers of people around them. Uniformed Fleet crews were running to and fro, other personnel were gathering here and there, and everyone seemed to be working efficiently to assess and begin to clear the damage.

"Was anyone else hurt?" She looked around. Now that they were well away from the blast area and the worst of the dust had settled, she could clearly see where a good half of the enormous hangar had collapsed. Thankfully, it was on the other side to where she and Lyle had sheltered. But it was probably mere chance…

She gulped down a shiver at the thought.

"I believe there were some minor injuries to one or two scientists who were on their way to the hangar when the bomb exploded, but they will recover." Rowland glanced at Lyle. "It's a damn good job you two were spotted heading this way or we'd not have known where to look for you."

"My VTV was in the laboratory," confessed Lyle. "A stupid mistake. I should have taken it in last night." He shook his head.

"Personally," said Barbara, "I'm just happy that we're uninjured, and that there were no fatalities. So I think we should move on to more important matters than where you left your VTV, Lyle."

His lips twitched. "Yes, my Lady."

Rowland glanced at him. "It's not easy."

"I can believe it."

Shaking more dust from her skirts, Barbara ignored the by-play. "Rowland, you and I need to go home and change our clothes. Unless you have more…what was it…chaps to find?"

He shook his head. "No, I found everyone, thank you. It's a good time for us to leave."

“Will you call the carriage? I will wait here under the already-proven efficient protection of the Commander.” She slid her arm through his and urged him forward to the foyer of the Command Centre.

“Righty ho.” Rowland grinned at Lyle and hurried off.

“He’s a very good man, your brother,” said Lyle. “You’re quite cruel to him sometimes, you know.”

She chuckled. “He gets his own back, believe me. But you’re right. He is a good man and I’m very lucky to have him.”

Lyle remained quiet, standing beside her, his eyes everywhere at once.

“You’re looking to see if he’s still here, aren’t you? The bomber?”

“How can I possibly do that? We have no idea who to look for. Or even if it’s a *he*.”

Barbara opened her mouth to ask one of the many questions rushing into her head, but then she shut it again for a moment or two. “Lyle, would you do Rowland and me the honour of joining us for dinner this evening? It would be a way for us to say thank you for what you did today.”

“No thanks are necessary, but yes. I would very much like that.”

She smiled. Right at him, right into his eyes, wanting to see if she could stir some of that heat she knew lurked beneath the rather dusty and torn uniform.

And there it was.

“Excellent,” she beamed. “I’m sure you know where Treadwell House is. We dine at eight, but do come early for sherry.” The Withersham carriage pulled up in front of the Centre as they walked out to the top steps.

“It will be my pleasure, my Lady.” Lyle bowed formally.

“I hope so,” replied Barbara. “I *really* do hope so.”

Chapter Four

She might have put up a brave and nonchalant front, but Barbara was only too well-aware of how close they'd come to being killed. If not for a series of fortunate coincidences, bits of her and Lyle could even now be adorning the pile of debris that used to be an airship hangar.

Once home, and reassuring Rowland that all was well, she disappeared into her own rooms, summoned her maid, and luxuriated in a long hot bath. During which she broke down and cried, hiding the sounds in her washcloth. The shock was there, no matter how much she tried to hide it, so she let it out, indulging in a fit of weeping that lasted until the water was cool and her toes turned to pink prunes.

When the tears eased and she was down to a sniffle or two, she left her bath and did her best to turn her mind to other more pleasant matters. She had time to erase all the signs of her emotional outburst, and took advantage of it, allowing herself a short nap which went a long way toward restoring her equanimity.

A cup of tea and a survey of her wardrobe finished the job, and she dressed for dinner with a heightened sense of excitement. Not because of the morning's disaster, but because Commander Meredith would be joining them.

She slipped into her undergarments, enjoying the soft silk against her skin before the obligatory corset covered them. Sighing, she allowed her maid to assist her, wigging herself until she was satisfied her breasts mounded in a correct but enticing fashion, and then tying the laces to ensure they stayed that way for the whole evening.

It wasn't the most formal of gowns, but it was perfect for a private dinner, and she liked it. It gave her a degree of confidence that she felt she needed tonight.

"It looks so lovely on you, my Lady." Her maid sighed on a smile.

"Thank you, Jennie. Yes, I've always loved this one." She smoothed her hand down over the pale blue silk. "Is the bustle centred?"

Jennie gave the large silk bow a twitch. "There you are. Perfect."

"The aquamarines to go with it, I think." Barbara tilted her head to one side, surveying herself in the mirror. "Just the earrings and pendant. No bracelet. One mustn't overdo these things."

Her hair was pinned into a small knot low on her neck. It wasn't very long, but Jennie was skillful with pins and always managed to create an elegant style that showed off a nice pair of earrings to perfection.

She fixed them to her lobes and nodded. “That will do nicely. Thank you, Jennie.”

“You look beautiful, my Lady, if you don’t mind my saying so.” She busied herself tidying the vanity. “Someone special coming for dinner tonight, maybe?”

Barbara grinned. “Just a friend of Rowland’s.”

“Ah.” Jennie, who had served Barbara for the last six years, shot her a speaking glance. “That’ll be lovely then, won’t it.”

“Don’t give me that look. I know what you’re thinking and no. He’s not coming to court me.”

“I would never presume, my Lady.” She chuckled. “I was thinking you might be after courting him. Because he’d be helpless against your wiles when you look so pretty.”

Barbara glanced once more at the long glass. “D’you think so…” She laughed. “Drat, Jennie. Forget I said that. I must go down.” She picked up her fan and gloves. “And yes, I’ll tell you all about him later.”

Jennie curtsied with an affectionate smile. “You just enjoy yourself, Ma’am.”

“I’m planning on it.”

Barbara whisked herself out of her room and downstairs, aware her heart was beating a little faster than it should have been for a casual dinner.

“Hullo, darling. God, you’re looking more gorgeous than ever.” Rowland arrived in the hall at the same time she did and dropped a light kiss on her cheek.

“And aren’t you fine,” she answered, twitching his cravat. “Anyone would think Her Majesty is attending.”

“Hah. We both know this level of perfection wouldn’t be nearly sufficient for that sort of evening. But I doubt Lyle will be too offended at our lack of ornamentation.”

The front knocker sounded at his words. Mallow appeared, nodded to the two of them and proceeded to open the door.

“Commander Meredith, my Lord, my Lady,” he announced in grave tones. “May I take your hat, sir?”

Thus welcomed into Treadwell House, Lyle grinned, gave Mallow his hat and gloves and walked across the hall. “Good evening,” he looked carefully at both of them. Then he lifted an eyebrow. “Should I have worn my medals?”

“God, no,” laughed Rowland. “But we have to do the pretty, you know. Guest for dinner and all that.”

“Indeed,” added Barbara. “On an ordinary evening, I’m in my old slippers and robe and Rowland wears something that looks rather like a sheik’s coat. After the camels have nibbled on it.”

Her mouth twitched, and she saw the beginnings of a smile on the Commander's lips.

"I'm sure that would be an interesting sight. Remind me to drop in unannounced at some point so that I can see for myself."

"I will," she laughed. "But until then, may I interest you in a glass of sherry before dinner?"

~*~

Lyle walked into the drawing room of Treadwell House, unsure of what he might find. He'd known Rowland for a while, but this was the first time he'd actually been inside the elegant house.

He was happily surprised.

It wasn't so much a formal room as a place that offered comfort, ease and plenty of small tables to hold whatever one might want to keep near. A book, perhaps, a plate of biscuits, or the inevitable cups of tea.

This evening it was sherry, gleaming cut crystal glasses containing the rich glowing liquid. They sat in leather chairs that had clearly adapted themselves to the human frame over time, and the candles flickered against walls of tasteful cream and gold.

He could be quite happy in a room like this, he realised. He'd stick his feet up on that ottoman, grab the book next to him and spend a couple of hours lost in whatever he was reading.

Rowland and his sister definitely fostered that image. They were both casual, friendly and delightful, chatting casually on topics of mutual interest. He paid particular attention to Barbara, watching for any signs of shock consequent upon their near-death experience of the morning.

He saw not one tiny tremor or twitch, which was surprising, but—given what he was starting to learn about Lady Barbara—not entirely unexpected.

When the conversation naturally turned to those events, she looked at him directly without flinching.

"And you're sure you suffered no injuries, Lyle?"

"None at all," he answered. "Although I'm certain there will be a few moments over the days ahead when I'll develop a case of anxiety."

"A quarter past three," murmured Barbara.

Rowland frowned. "No, it's ten to eight?" He looked at the clock on the mantel.

"No, no, what I meant was in reference to those moments of anxiety." She looked at Lyle. "For me, it's when I awaken, usually

around a quarter to three in the morning. That's when I'm sure I will have my own moments of anxiety." She nodded at him. "It's a good way of describing it, too."

Before he could reply, Mallow entered announcing that dinner was served, so they walked into the dining room, where Lyle was very pleased to see a small table set for three in front of one of the many bow windows overlooking the modest gardens behind Treadwell House.

He heaved a sigh of relief and glanced at Rowland. "Thank God. I won't have to shout at either of you to make conversation."

Barbara nodded. "I agree. Which is why we have this particular arrangement. Using a table meant for thirty for three people is utterly absurd."

She let him seat her as Rowland took his chair, and as Lyle moved to his own, he touched her shoulder lightly. "A very sensible notion. I wish more hostesses would consider it."

He wasn't sure why he felt the need to lay his fingers on that lovely expanse of bare shoulder, but he did. It was an urge he simply couldn't deny, and he noted a tiny little shiver in response. Her earbobs glittered brightly as her body responded to his touch.

It wasn't something he'd planned, nor anticipated. He had much work ahead of him in AirFleet, overseeing new airship construction, crew assignments and, as always, involvement in the ongoing battle in the East. Damned wars. England didn't seem able to stay out of 'em.

And yet here he was, fascinated by the twinkle of a woman's earrings. And the silky feel of her skin beneath his fingertips.

He sighed, then smiled as the start of what looked like a delicious meal began.

~*~

"So as yet there are no clues?"

Inevitably they were back to discussing the explosion, and Barbara was eager to know what developments might have occurred during the afternoon.

"Not at the moment," Lyle shook his head. "The debris will be thoroughly examined, of course. But if it's like the last ones, there'll be no trace of any explosives. That is one of the biggest puzzles so far," he looked at each of them, "and I'll ask that you keep it to yourselves for the moment, if you would. There are some things we prefer the public not to know."

"We both understand that, Lyle," said Rowland, glancing at

Barbara.

"Indeed. Perfectly sensible," she agreed. "But let me ask you this. If it were a known explosive, what *would* you expect to find?"

He leaned back, thinking. "Well, there are patterns that go along with most of our usual materials. Scorch marks, smells, things like that. There is always a little dust left over and where we find those sorts of things goes a long way to telling us about the force of the explosion. Once we know the force, we can either include or eliminate various substances."

"Hmm." Barbara thought about that. "And yet there is nothing like this at these particular events?"

"No. Nothing that we recognise."

Rowland sipped his wine. "Then it's possible those patterns are there, but you're not seeing them…"

"I'm afraid that's true, but it's hard to look for something when you don't know what it is." He blinked. "If that made any sense."

"Actually, it did," Barbara said with a smile.

"What we need," continued Lyle, "is a place we could take samples from all the explosions and test them for various substances." He picked up his wine and stared at it. "We know the central blast point. We know the nearest objects. If we could only run tests on those…"

She put down her knife and fork neatly on her plate. "Why can't you?"

He met her gaze. "Because it cannot be public, my Lady. There are a lot of people in the laboratories. Someone would mention that we didn't know what we were looking for and in next to no time you'd be reading about how AirFleet has no idea what the bombs are in your morning newspaper, along with the information that we also don't have a clue as to who is responsible."

"Not something that's going to inspire confidence, for sure." Rowland looked sombre.

"So nobody saw anything untoward before the blast?"

Lyle shook his head. "No, my Lady. It turns out that there were some visitors that morning, besides yourselves. One of the barracks was hosting an open house…" He shrugged. "A chance for families to visit and make sure their sons aren't living in terrible squalor."

"Really?" Barbara raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"Yes, really. It takes about a week to clean up that terrible squalor and make a barracks presentable to whoever is coming to visit. It's about the only way to get our Airfighters to clean their rooms."

She laughed, enjoying the amusing anecdote. And yet all the time her mind was working.

At that moment, a servant knocked and entered, carrying the obligatory salver and note. This time it was for Rowland.

He read it and his head swivelled to Barbara. “It’s from John. Marguerite is about to give birth.” He rose. “Forgive me, Lyle, Barbara will explain.”

He was gone before the echo of his words had faded.

Lyle turned to Barbara. “One hates to appear curious, but who is Marguerite and why is Rowland concerned about her giving birth?” He paused. “I trust this is not an inappropriate question, my Lady…”

She pushed back her chair and stood. “Come and have a drop of brandy. I’ll tell you all about Marguerite. Rowland’s only true love.”

They walked together back into the drawing room.

“Tea, my Lady?”

Barbara looked at Mallow. “Brandy, Mallow.”

She received a stern gaze from beneath greying eyebrows. “Is my Lady quite sure?”

“I am indeed, Mallow. And you may pour a glass for the Commander as well. My brother will be detained for a while, so you’d best leave the decanter. I know he’ll want a glass when he returns.”

Oozing disapproval, the butler obeyed, finally leaving with his back ramrod straight.

“I don’t think he was pleased,” observed Lyle as he sat on one of the comfortable chairs.

“Dear Mallow. He is the salt of the earth,” answered Barbara. “But he hasn’t been pleased in the last three decades at least.”

“Ah. Well, I can say he pours excellent brandy.” Lyle sipped with evident delight. “So. Marguerite.”

“Yes. Marguerite.” Barbara sipped too. “She’s lovely, you know. Long legs, eyes that will melt your heart, the softest brown hair…and the sweetest whinny.”

Lyle laughed. “A horse.”

“Not just any horse,” Barbara reprimanded. “Rowland’s passion.” She absently kicked off her slippers, settling back into the corner of the couch.

Lyle was charmed by her informal behaviour. Others would have been horrified, but he was too busy enjoying her company to worry about such things.

“Marguerite came to us as a foal, and she and Rowland took to each other right away. She was the only thing he’d get out of bed early for, and as she grew the two of them became almost inseparable down at Treadwell Vale. I do believe he’d have brought her into the house if I had allowed it.” She chuckled.

“I take it Marguerite is now here in London?”

“Yes. Rowland brought her up to meet a young lad by the name of Black Dandy.”

Lyle blinked. “Wait. Stop there. I’ve heard that name…”

"I'm sure you have. Black Dandy has won every race he entered at Newmarket. He also won the Derby at Epsom Downs last year."

"And Rowland got him for Marguerite's stud?"

"Rowland and Sir Stanley Arnull went to Oxford together."

"Ah." Lyle nodded. "Sir Stanley being Black Dandy's owner, of course. And tonight we'll find out the results of this matchmaking?"

"Both Rowland and Stanley are hoping for a fine young lad with hooves like the wind."

Lyle chuckled at that. "I believe every racehorse owner has the same dream."

Barbara was quiet for a moment, thinking over an idea that had germinated at dinner and was growing by the minute. "Lyle, you said you wished you had a place where you could evaluate the blast patterns, correct?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Would you consider Treadwell Vale?"

Lyle's eyebrows rose. "Your family seat?"

"It's a very nice house. Not too far from town, but well isolated from prying eyes by the forests. We pride ourselves on our forests, you know."

"I didn't, but it's an interesting point."

Since his response meant absolutely nothing, Barbara deduced he was still thinking.

"Let me throw something else out that you might view as an incentive." She tucked her feet up under her skirts, a normal position for her. Somehow she thought better when she was comfortable.

"My papa was a man fascinated by science. He barely shared any of it, of course, but he did leave a quite respectable laboratory behind at the Vale. I have…um…sort of take it over for my own work."

"*Your* work?" Lyle looked surprised.

"Yes." She stared back at him. "I have some scientific interests myself. I can certainly offer an adequate, if not large, facility for your investigations."

"What do you work *on*?"

He wasn't going to let her gloss over that, dammit. "I build things. I experiment with things that interest me."

Before he could answer, however, a flurry at the door resolved itself into Aurelia Elkins.

"Barbara, I'm so sorry to barge in like this, but Jonas learned that Marguerite is in foal…" She looked windblown and her hat was helter-skelter.

"Yes. Go. You know the way."

"I do." She glanced at Lyle. "So sorry, do excuse me…" and she was gone.

“Um…” Lyle waved his hand in the direction of her exit. “And that was Miss Aurelia Elkins. Marguerite’s mother?”

Barbara let out a laugh. “She did act like it, didn’t she? But she and Rowland have an affinity for horses, and she loves Marguerite as much as Rowland does. I wondered if he had sent her a message, but I see word travels fast in the stables.”

“You don’t want to go and observe the birth?”

“Lord, no. I like Marguerite, of course, she’s a sweetheart. But I’ll leave the delivery to those who know what they’re doing.”

“You have other interests.”

“Yes. And getting back to my offer, Treadwell Vale also might have something of particular interest.”

“Besides yourself, what would that be?”

A tiny bit rattled by the compliment, Barbara blinked and fought to recover her composure. “Er, thank you. But I was speaking of a rather *special* sort of chemical.”

“Really?” He lifted his glass.

She looked at him. “Does the name *thonirium* ring a bell?”

The always in-control, imperturbable Commander Meredith sucked in a gasp and choked on his brandy.

Chapter Five

"Oh dear."

Barbara hurried from the couch to slap Lyle on the back, hoping he wasn't choking to death on the brandy that had gone down the wrong way.

"Oof." He leaned forward, waving her off. "That's fine, thank you." He croaked and coughed, but was obviously breathing, so she returned to her seat to calm herself.

"You scared me," she admitted. "And I suppose I should apologise, since you reacted so strongly to my mention of my thonirium supply."

Lyle put his glass down with caution, wiped a tear away from one eye and turned to face her. "Barbara. You say you have thonirium in this laboratory of yours."

"Yes, I do."

"The one in your country home. Treadwell Vale."

"That's correct."

"*Thonirium*."

Barbara blinked. "Yes. I just said so."

Lyle took a breath. "How much?"

"What do you mean, how much?" She frowned. "How much did it cost?"

"How much do you have?" He spoke slowly and clearly.

"Oh," she thought for a moment. "No more than half a dozen grains, I should guess…"

He closed his eyes briefly. Then opened them again. "I'm only going to say this once, my Lady. You must give those grains to my technicians immediately."

"I shall do no such thing." Barbara straightened in her seat. "I had the devil of a time procuring them. And they are vital to my experiments."

"Barbara." Lyle seemed unable to decide on whether to address her formally or not. He must be in quite a state. She managed not to smile at the notion.

"Yes?"

"Do you understand…" He took a breath. "Do you understand that only *one* of those grains, if handled incorrectly, could blow Treadwell Vale and most of the surrounding acreage to *hell and back*?" His voice rose in volume at the end of his question.

She ignored it. "Of course I do. I'm not an idiot, Lyle."

Staring at her, he opened his mouth, but nothing came out except for the trace of a whimper.

She took pity on him. “Listen. I have had some very good instruction from a variety of tutors. Yes, I am aware that thonirium is a prized substance which can, under the right circumstances, become a violent and dangerous explosive.”

“At last,” Lyle breathed. “Some common sense.”

“I would never treat such a material with anything but the greatest respect and caution,” she continued. “And it is kept securely locked away in a protected portion of the laboratory. I only withdraw the tiniest amount when I am ready to test my current experiment.”

“Which is?” Lyle’s gaze was steely.

She lifted her chin. “I am looking into the possibilities that, if handled correctly, thonirium may prove to be a source of unlimited power.”

“*Jesus Christ*.” He closed his eyes again.

“I see no need for you to get upset,” she snapped. “I know what I’m doing. And I certainly wish you’d allow me credit for not being a complete fool.”

“Upset? I’m not *upset*.” Lyle rose and paced the room. “I’m bloody *furious*, woman.” He spun around and paced, ending up in front of her. “You’ve managed to lay your hands on some of the most dangerous material in the entire damn universe, and you’re experimenting with it.”

He leaned over, penning her into the corner with one hand on the arm and other on the back of the couch. “Are you completely *insane*?”

She pushed him backwards with both hands on his chest and rose to her feet, glaring at him. “How typical. Just because I’m a woman, I’m supposed to know nothing of the sciences, have no interest in experimentation, and I suppose you think I should spend my entire life choosing dresses, dancing, and flirting at balls.”

“I didn’t mean…”

“No you didn’t, of course. You didn’t mean to accuse me of being an empty-headed ninnyhammer. You certainly wouldn’t imply that I was just *playing* with a substance that could easily blow up half of London.” She leaned forward, closing the distance between them, staring right up into his face. “It might interest you to know, Commander, that thonirium is *completely harmless until detonated*. I could put it in my hair, wear it around my neck or slap it right here…” She slammed the palm of her hand against his chest, “…and it would be inactive. It wouldn’t blow you or me to smithereens. It requires a very special kind of detonator. Do I make myself clear? *I am not stupid*.”

His eyes heated as he gazed at her. “I agree. You’re not stupid. But

you are dangerous, Barbara. As dangerous as your damn thonirium…"

His arms were around her and their bodies clashed, taking her breath away. He gave it back as he kissed her, a hard and fierce meeting of mouths and lips and tongues.

There was no polite gentility about this kiss; it was all fire and need, and Barbara gave as good as she got. Her hands clawed at his shoulders and around to the back of his neck where she grabbed a handful of his hair. He moaned a little when she tugged it in an effort to move his head where she wanted it.

Tugging her to her feet, Lyle held her, one arm crushing her against his waistcoat, the other sliding up her side to cup her breast through her corset.

She moaned as his clever thumb found her nipple through the silk, and whimpered as he rubbed it to a hard peak, making her close her eyes with pleasure as darts of fire shot down through her body.

"Lyle," she tore her mouth from his and whispered his name.

"Damn, Barbara," he groaned. "Damn."

Without even realising it, he pulled her back down to the couch with him, his hands everywhere, her shoulders bare for his mouth and teeth.

Little nips distracted her from a hand that crept beneath her skirts, and when his head dipped to her cleavage and his tongue traced the edge of her bodice…she was lost. Drowning in sensations more erotic than she could ever have imagined, she found herself automatically parting her thighs to welcome his investigating hand.

He kissed her again, pressing her against him, finding her heat and unerringly rubbing just the right spot as his tongue thrust wildly into her mouth and duelled with hers.

She was wild, moving over him, moaning with pleasure at the sensations he was rousing low in her body.

Where it would have led…well, she wasn't thinking of anything but Lyle and her needs. Until a door slammed outside the drawing room and both of them remembered where they were.

"I…" Lyle jumped up, blinking, "I…"

Barbara sat up and straightened her gown. Then she cleared her throat.

"It's a colt. A damned beautiful boy." Rowland erupted into the room, followed by Aurelia. Both were flushed, and a bit grubby, with one or two bits of hay still attached to their clothing.

"Oh, how wonderful," Barbara rose and hugged him, ignoring the hay. Then she did the same to Aurelia. "And Marguerite? Is she well?"

"Perfectly," rejoiced Aurelia. "She came through the ordeal like a trooper, took care of her little one right away, and when we left, he was already on his feet and nursing." She glanced at Rowland. "Such a

beauty."

"It would appear congratulations are in order." Lyle smiled. "Here." He had poured two small glasses of brandy and he passed them to Rowland and Aurelia. "To the newest addition to the Treadwell family."

The toast was made, the conversation continued for a few moments, and then Aurelia set down her glass. "I must go before Mama has a heart attack at the thought of me being out so late without her."

"I'll drive you back," said Rowland. "And don't argue, my girl. 'Tis far too late for you to be walking home unattended."

Aurelia grinned at Barbara and raised her hands helplessly. "What can I do?"

"Agree with him and go home," Barbara laughed. "It's been a busy night."

Farewells were said, and within moments Barbara and Lyle were once more alone.

He glanced at her. "I must leave."

She swallowed, looking at him, knowing what she wanted and understanding what she couldn't have. Finally, she nodded. "Yes. I suppose you must." She straightened. "But please consider the invitation to Treadwell Vale?"

He neared her. "Will you let my technicians play with your thonirium?"

She thought about it. "No."

"Never mind. I'll come anyway."

"Good." She watched him as he closed the distance between them, put his fingers under her chin and raised her face to his. "Close your eyes."

Doing as he bid, she felt the heat of him a second before his lips touched hers in a gentle caress. "You're more dangerous than all the thonirium in the world, Barbara," he whispered against her mouth. "And I wouldn't have you any other way."

He released her, turned, and left the room. She heard him speaking to Mallow and then the very final sound of the front door closing.

Her breath shuddered as she sucked in air and fought to steady her thoughts.

She'd never dreamed of feeling like this. Still sizzling from the touch of a man's hands on her body and still aching for more.

~*~

"The Vale?"

Rowland's eyebrows rose over his morning paper as Barbara related her plan and her invitation to Lyle.

"Yes, it might work well for his crew's research." She kept her voice level and trusted that her brother wouldn't look at her too closely and see the evidence of a mostly sleepless night.

"Well, I can't think of a reason why not, but are you sure Papa's laboratory will do? We are only a country house, you know, not a scientific establishment."

She nodded. "I know. But you never really understood exactly what Papa built there, Rowland. Did you ever go out and investigate?"

He shook his head. "No. I have to admit you have me there. It held no interest for me as we were growing up, and it holds even less now."

"Not many people knew of his interests," mused Barbara. "It doubtless would have seemed most odd for an Earl to be experimenting with various things."

"Probably wise to keep it to himself. One becomes known as an eccentric, and one loses all credibility. You know how it is, Barbara."

"I do," she answered ruefully. "But anyway, you don't mind if Lyle arrives? Possibly with some of his staff?"

"Not at all." Rowland put away his paper. "Actually, now that Marguerite has foaled, I'm thinking of bringing her and the little one back to the Vale. Get them out into some proper grazing and fresh air. So will you come down as well?"

"I shouldn't, of course. The Season and all that nonsense…" She thought about it for all of two seconds. "But yes, I could use a change of scenery."

"And?" He watched her.

"What?" She frowned across the table.

"You want to ask Aurelia and Imelda too."

As a matter of fact, she hadn't been thinking about her best friends. Guiltily, she tucked away thoughts of getting Lyle alone at night and merely grinned at Rowland. "It would be lovely, you must admit."

"Then by all means do so." He stood and stretched. "I'll have Mallow send a note down to Killigrew, alerting him of our arrival."

"He'll be overjoyed, I'm sure," she chuckled, thinking of their faithful butler who regarded Treadwell Vale as his own property, and its occupants as intruders. "Aurelia will be eager to come down and keep an eye on the new foal. I just hope Imelda can get away from her family. A break would do her good as well."

"I'll leave all that to you then," he nodded, dropping a kiss on her head as he passed her on the way to the door. "It's so lovely having an

organised sister."

She sniffed. "Until she organises *you*…"

She returned to her paper for a few moments, and then Mallow appeared.

"A note for you, my Lady." He bowed and presented the tray.

"From?"

"I would assume, given the nature of the handwriting—most upright and precise—and the mark on the back of the envelope indicating it is AirFleet stationery, that it might have originated from Commander Meredith?"

"You would have made an excellent spy, Mallow. I'm most impressed." She tore open the envelope and glanced at the signature. "And you are completely correct. Well done."

"Thank you, my Lady." He bowed and departed with a definitely jaunty step.

His steps weren't nearly as jaunty as Barbara's heart as she read the note from Lyle.

"Lady Barbara,

Your invitation to Treadwell Vale is accepted with grateful thanks. If it meets with your approval, I shall be arriving Monday next, in the company of several of my technical crew. We are in your debt,

Yrs, Meredith."

There was a footnote.

"PS. We're flying down. Come with us. Rumble Hill at seven o'clock in the morning."

For a second or two, Barbara's world went quite fuzzy as the meaning of the invitation percolated down through her brain and all the way to her toes.

They were *flying* down.

In an *airship*.

She took a breath, and another, and then stood up, walked to a nearby chair and grabbed a cushion, putting it over her face.

Then she screamed, long and loudly.

Fortunately, nobody heard.

The remaining days passed far too slowly for her liking, and even though both Imelda and Aurelia welcomed the chance to leave London for a little while and would be joining her in the country, Barbara couldn't focus on much of anything except the upcoming flight.

She allowed Jennie to suggest clothing for the visit, not worrying

too much about such things because she had a full wardrobe at the Vale and did not plan on hosting any grand entertainments.

"Oh, but you'll need something stylish, my Lady. With those Airfighters there, I'll wager my best bonnet that you'll have visitors aplenty. You know what country folk are like when there are eligible young men in the vicinity."

"Urgh." Barbara blinked as the truth of Jennie's statement dawned on her. "You're right." She sighed.

"How about this one? You always look so lovely in this shade of pink."

"Yes, very well. It will be fine." She barely glanced at the rose silk. "Did you pack my boots?"

Jennie chuckled. "The only boots you have here, my Lady, won't do you a lick of good in a muddy field. You didn't bring your country boots with you this time."

"Oh, right. I forgot." She looked around, doing her best to drag her recalcitrant thoughts away from airships and the men who commanded them. "My notebook. I do need that."

"In the library, I believe, my Lady. That's the last time I saw you working on it."

"Ah yes. Thank you, Jennie. I'll fetch it now and put it in my carpetbag. I trust you with the rest of it."

Hastening to the library, Barbara soon found her notebook, a leather-covered bundle of thoughts, ideas and half-finished notations on various projects.

As was her wont, she gazed at the shelves, inhaling the smell of paper, bindings and knowledge. Her love of such places had never faded and she wandered the room, glancing at titles here and there until she found her late Papa's shelves. The classics were here, of course. As well as many engineering documents and illustrated textbooks. Some she'd read, others were fascinating in their concepts and dull as dishwater in their actual content.

One shelf held books that were in danger of sliding down, something Barbara hated to see. So she carefully picked up the volumes at the end, standing them at more of an angle since the large marble block that was supposed to act as a bookend and hold them all in place had migrated elsewhere.

One of the titles caught her eye. *"The Mysteries of Explosives and Detonators".* Immediately, her hand reached for it and removed it from the shelf.

"Well, well," she murmured, glancing at the first few pages. "This might be very useful. Very useful indeed."

With that comment, she tucked the book under her arm, along with her notebook, and headed back to her room. Now at least she

had something to read to while away the last few days before her eventful flight on Monday morning.

An airship. She was going to fly in an airship. A long-held dream finally coming true.

With Lyle.

She took a quick look around at the empty hall, then did a tiny little dance, letting sheer joy dictate where her toes landed. At the end she found herself opposite a large mirror, and stared, wondering if that flushed and smiling woman was actually her.

Chestnut hair flew untidily beside her face, her blue eyes shone, and a smile wreathed her lips.

She didn't look quite like herself, but she couldn't work out why.

Perhaps it was because for one of the few times she could remember, she was completely and absolutely happy, excited, and more eager to get through the next couple of days than she'd ever been as a child awaiting Christmas.

Airships and Lyle.

Life couldn't be much better than that.

"You look chipper." Rowland's voice echoed throughout the hall. He stood at the door, leaning against the jamb, and watching her. "You must truly be looking forward to leaving London for a bit."

"I am," she nodded. "I *really* am. And, Rowland…" She paused. Should she tell him of her journey? Oh, why not? He was her brother, after all. "And Lyle has invited me to join him for the trip down."

"Nice of him. Is he taking his carriage or one of those strange mechanical vehicles? You know, the ones that make a lot of noise, leave a terrible smell behind them, and are always breaking down and blocking roadways?"

"Er…" She cleared her throat. "Well…"

He held up his hand. "That's all right. Don't tell me. I have a feeling I'd rather not know. But please remember, Menace, that the last time one of those steamcabs rolled past Treadwell Vale, all the cows stopped giving milk for three whole days."

"Oh, you're right. I remember that," she grinned. "I'm sure they've been modified since then. The steamcabs, not the cows, of course. That had to be three or four years ago now."

"Still a bloody nuisance, if you ask me. What's wrong with horses? Magnificent beasts. Quiet, all they need is good food and water, and a commonsense hand on their reins. They'll never let you down."

Barbara sighed. "So Marguerite and her little one are coming too?"

Rowland nodded. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I'm driving them down myself in the horse-wagon." He looked slightly self-conscious and cleared his throat. "Aurelia is going to come with me. It seems her family has need of their carriage, and I didn't see why they should

have to hire one for a short trip. Only a few hours. Quite proper, and plenty of room."

"Of course." Barbara nodded, trying desperately not to laugh at Rowland's expression. "A marvellous idea. Especially since Imelda will be coming down a day later. This way I won't be on my own at all."

"Right." Her brother nodded back awkwardly. "I'll let you get on then."

"Yes." She walked to Rowland and hugged him. "I'm so glad we're going. What a lovely time we're all going to have."

Chapter Six

After what seemed to Barbara like the longest night in the history of the world, Monday morning finally arrived.

She was up and about as the sun rose, bathed and dressed twenty minutes later, and ready to go just before half-past six. The carriage would arrive soon, and the drive to Rumble Hill should be simple at this hour.

Knowing what to wear when taking a flight on an airship was a challenge, of course, but one Barbara believed she'd resolved to her satisfaction. Thankfully setting aside any thought of corsets, she chose a dark green walking skirt, sans bustle, a crisp white blouse with a high, lace trimmed collar, and a soft leather jacket. It was lightweight, but would protect her against any chill breezes that she might experience. It also possessed several of her own modifications. Pockets inside…a shocking notion, since whatever could a woman possibly want with pockets? A special section running just down the front of the lining, in which she had stored her tinted goggles, and a loop near the front button which would hold her gloves when she wasn't wearing them.

Jennie had managed to pull her hair a little higher than normal, which meant that her favourite travelling hat could be securely pinned through the knot, keeping everything in place. The veil could be unfurled if she needed it, but she doubted that dust would be a problem once in the air.

In the air.

Just the thought of flying had her heart dancing with excitement again, and she pressed a hand to bosom as she left Treadwell House and stepped into the carriage. "I'll see you later this afternoon, Jennie," she said through the open door.

"Yes, my Lady. We'll be there. Here's your reticule, and I made sure the lenses of your goggles are clean and shiny."

"Excellent," Barbara nodded. "You're a treasure, and I have no idea what I'd do without you."

"Oh, now, my Lady," blushed the girl. "You're too kind."

The young tiger shut the door and jumped up onto the box next to the driver, rocking the carriage a little.

"Time to go. Enjoy the drive down," Barbara called through the window at the receding figure of her maid.

Jennie waved back.

"This is it. I'm really doing this." Her breath caught, and she

laughed at herself. “And I’ll enjoy it more if I can calm down and remember I’m not ten years old.”

With that thought in mind, she sat back and watched the London streets gradually give way to the trees and fields that ringed the Metropolis. Spring was fully upon them, the brilliant green of the new leaves vying for attention with the shrubs that littered the hedgerows, rhododendrons stabbing the eye with their striking colours. Reds, whites, some purples and others in various combinations that lit up shady glades. Forsythias were shedding their golden robes for sweet green leaves, and other flowers dotted the road along which she travelled.

The air was fresh and clean now, free of the lingering smoke and smog that occasionally fouled London’s streets. Why this trip seemed twice as long as the last time she’d made it, she wasn’t sure, but eventually the horses slowed as they approached Rumble Hill.

“Morning Ma’am.” A guard from the entrance stepped to the carriage window and saluted her smartly. “May I ask your business?”

“I’m here to meet Commander Meredith,” she answered. “We’re travelling—er—out of town today.” Not sure how much of their plans she should reveal, she had chosen discretion over complete honesty.

He pulled a notebook from his pocket and turned a page or two. “You’d be Lady Treadwell?”

“I would,” she smiled.

“Very good, Ma’am. I’ll be directing your carriage right round to the yards. The Commander is there.”

“Thank you so much. Good day.” Barbara nodded at the lad. And sure enough, after a brief conversation with her driver, they set off once more.

She recognised the Command Centre, quiet at this hour, and passed the ruins of the hangar. It was an ugly reminder of that horrid morning, but already there were signs of rebuilding and repairing.

A few minutes later, the forested path they were on gave way to an open field.

And Barbara lost her breath completely.

There were three magnificent airships berthed at one end, and two more were being fueled not far away.

The sun, the green of the grass and the sparkling magic of these flying beasts…it was enough to bring tears to her eyes. “How incredible…” she breathed, hanging out of the window in her eagerness. “How beautiful…”

The carriage slowed, and suddenly the true size of these things made itself known. They were *massive*, more massive than she’d imagined, towering above the ground like glittering silver mountains, sleek and shining, dwarfing everything around them.

From this perspective, the cabin and the engines seemed quite tiny.

Drawing to a standstill, Barbara gathered her skirts, then jumped a little as a voice hailed her.

"You made it then." Lyle was at the door, opening it and letting the steps down. He gleamed in the sunlight, his uniform bright with gold braid, his cap spotless.

"Goodness, what a lovely welcome." She grinned and accepted his hand as she left the carriage. "Good morning, Commander."

He gave her fingers a quick squeeze. "Good morning to you, Lady Barbara. May I compliment you on your attire? You have indeed chosen well." His gaze took in her practical clothing, and he nodded his approval.

"I almost wore my lilac silk with all the flowers," she said dryly.

"No you didn't," he laughed. "I apologise if I was rude. But sadly, the few ladies who have ventured this far into AirFleet have done so clad in gowns better suited to Buckingham Palace than the Rumble Hill airship yards."

She was about to comment on his words, but once again, her brain stumbled over the size of the vehicles hovering above them. "How do you ever get used to this?" Her head was tilted backwards, her eyes wide, trying to take in the sheer volume of what she was looking at.

"You don't," he answered quietly. "You simply appreciate it."

She nodded, silent for a moment, flooded with awe. Then Lyle held out his arm.

"It's time, Barbara. Let's *fly*."

~*~

Her utter and complete enjoyment of each second was written so clearly across her face that Lyle had a hard time dragging his eyes away from her.

From the instant she'd set foot on the airfield, to the instant they'd begun the ascent up the steps to the cabin of his airship, she'd been as wide-eyed as a child and entranced by everything she saw.

He couldn't wait for her to see the inside.

Her little gasp was quite clear, and she turned to him, an expression of glee sparkling in her eyes and her lips in a wide smile. "Oh my. This is…" She moved down the cabin, going forward as if homing in on the huge wheel directly in front of the foreglass, three large windows arranged not unlike a bow window, but much, much bigger.

"Is this where you stand? Where you command the ship?" She

paused, just looking at the huge spokes, topped by the typical type of spindles found on any vessel, whether on the sea or in the air. The only difference was that these spindles had twines of gold braid at their bases, a decoration carved painstakingly into the entire wheel. They were, Lyle knew, works of art, commissioned for every airship, and each a little different.

"It is." He answered. "From this vantage point I have the best view of our course, and the weather conditions." He moved to stand beside her.

"Incredible. A field of vision that must be near to two hundred degrees and more." She turned her head from side to side. "Your communications unit would be…?"

"Here." He pointed to the right, where a tall, slender cabinet rose from the deck. On the slanted top were buttons, switches, toggles and dials.

"Of course," she breathed, leaning over it. "Engine room, propeller rotational adjustments, altitude, fuel gauges…" She blinked. "Liquids?"

"A cup of tea for the Commander." He smothered a chuckle. "Sometimes I get thirsty, and I can't exactly leave my post to go and put the kettle on."

"Good point," she smiled back. "And this would be where you put your charts?" Her hand gestured toward a glass-fronted holder where maps were obviously inserted.

"Yes." He turned to one side and removed a scroll from a box beside a small seat. "Here is our course for today." Unrolling it, he slipped it into the space between the glass and the wood, then cranked a little handle and flattened it out. "Now I can use a special pen to indicate our destination without destroying or damaging the map itself."

"Very clever," Barbara approved.

"So here we are…" He leaned over and drew an *X* on Rumble Hill. "And here's where we're going…Treadwell Vale." He put another *X* some way away on the upper left of the map. "It's a straightforward route, no complications, weather should be fine, so once we're up, we'll hold altitude until we're close enough to slow down and find a suitable spot to anchor."

"Commander," a voice hailed him. "Cleared for departure, sir."

"Very good." Lyle took his cap off and threw it casually at the wall where it hit, stayed and swung slightly.

Barbara blinked. "How long did you practice *that*?"

He grinned. "Quite some time. Of course, it didn't help that my damn crew kept moving the hook."

A few chuckles greeted this statement, and Barbara herself joined

in.

"Right then." He stepped in front of the wheel. "You could sit here if you'd like, or in my private cabin. It's aft, and probably more comfortable…"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to stay here and watch us get underway?" She pointed at the little seat. "As long as that's not a problem…"

He shook his head. "Not at all. That is where my second would be if this were a military flight…"

"Or a battle," she finished.

"Yes." His gaze remained on the instruments. "That too." He glanced at her. "Are you ready?"

She nodded eagerly.

"Look down."

He touched a toggle and a portion of the deck slid backward. There was nothing beneath it but glass.

"Good Lord," Barbara gasped.

"I have to see exactly where the nose is. I need to know when the mooring cables are unlinked and if there is any vegetation close by. This is the easiest way."

He automatically released the docking clamps, listened for the growing hum of the engines and began to ease the great machine free from her earthly bonds. The slight rocking told him that they had risen enough to catch a slight breeze, and he adjusted the angle of the engines, moving them upward across the field, over the trees, and finally into open air.

Barbara was completely silent, and he turned to his side to ask if she was all right. Then he closed his mouth as he realised any questions were superfluous.

The expression of wondrous delight on her face as she stared through the foreglass said it all.

~*~

It was heaven. Complete and utter heaven.

She was finally in the air, in an airship, and flying smoothly over the tops of the trees. The slight incline told her they were climbing, so she asked the first question that came into her mind.

"What altitude will we reach?"

Lyle shot her a quick glance. "Probably no more than a few hundred feet. Maybe a thousand if the terrain is more rugged than I anticipate."

"Of course," she nodded. "The evenness of the ground affects the air currents above."

A smiled creased his face as he kept his eyes on his instruments. "You always surprise me, Barbara."

A glow of pleasure suffused her, and she followed his gaze, marvelling at this new view of the world on which she lived. Their progress seemed slow, but in fact was quicker than most carriages, and she knew that these ships were designed to fly much faster, take advantage of thermal currents and swoop within gale winds. All manoeuvres that had been used successfully in battle. There were no airships anywhere else in the world to match these magnificent Gods of the skies.

Looking down, she saw they were passing over a small village, and she smiled at the sight of the residents looking up and pointing at them.

How far away they seemed; no more than ants running along a cobbled path.

Lyle had issued a few commands, and their vessel's engines had smoothed to a soft rumble. This must be the correct altitude.

Another officer walked up. "I can take the helm for a bit, sir. If you'd like to show the lady around?" He smiled at Barbara. "Are you enjoying the flight so far?"

What could she say? "I am speechless with delight. Truly. This is a dream come true for me."

"Lady Barbara, this is Lieutenant Commander Gervais Farrell. My ComSec."

"Ma'am." The Lieutenant bowed low. "A privilege to have you aboard."

Barbara felt her cheeks heat in a blush. He was very charming, and also very good looking in a Viking sort of way. His blond hair must have been quite long, since he had it tied back in a knot behind his neck. "You are so kind. May I ask what a ComSec is?"

"He's my right hand," answered Lyle before the other man could speak. "ComSec. Short for Command Second Officer."

"Ahh. A most important position, then."

"Indeed," continued Lyle. "Especially since he's now going to take over and fly us smoothly to our destination. Thus leaving me free to… as he suggested…give you a tour of the *Morrigan*."

He held out his hand and Barbara stood, eager to see more. "Then in that case I shall express my sincere thanks to Lieutenant Commander Farrell." She smiled at him. "Don't bump into anything while he's gone, please?"

Farrell grinned. "I'll do my best." He stepped into Lyle's spot and took the wheel, touching a button and announcing that ComSec had

the helm.

Thus freed, Lyle took Barbara's arm and guided her away from the front of their vessel. It was the first chance she'd had to look at the rest of it, and she was spellbound by how lovely it was.

There were several crew members at various stations, and she peeked around to see what they were doing. One had a gauge that apparently registered wind speed, another was calculating the distance of the horizon and a third marking cloud formations. Out of curiosity, she asked the first question that sprang into her mind. "How many crew do you have?"

"Only a handful on this trip," he replied. "Since we're only in the air for an hour or so, and no special operations will be taking place, we have a minimal crew. That makes room for the technicians who will be playing in your laboratory." He grinned at her. "But not with your thonirium, of course."

"Of course," she answered. "Er, did you mention it?"

He shook his head. "No. I thought it best they remain ignorant of its presence. Might make them too nervous."

She chuckled. The crew's AirFleet uniforms of deep teal blue and gold were a perfect foil for the beautifully worked woods that provided not only flooring and panelling, but also the coffered and curved ceiling above them. She doubted anyone aboard this airship got nervous about anything.

"The *Morrigan*?"

"An Irish goddess." Lyle flashed her a quick grin. "One should always court the favour of goddesses."

As they strolled down the central aisle, Lyle pointed out one or two things of interest, chatted briefly with his men, and then led Barbara onward to a door at the end.

He paused with his hand on the knob. "This is the entrance to our living quarters, our mess, and also the access to the engine room. Would you like to see it?"

She blinked at him. "You have to ask?"

He shook his head on a chuckle. "No. Silly me."

He led her into the aft portion of the vessel, a corridor not unlike that of a ship she'd once visited, and doors on either side, with a larger one at the end.,

As they entered, a gentleman emerged from one of the rooms. He was plainly dressed, and Barbara assumed he would be one of the technicians.

"Ah, Professor Royston," nodded Lyle. "Allow me to present you to Lady Barbara Treadwell. You and your lads will be working in her laboratory at Treadwell Vale."

The Professor bowed. "A great pleasure, my Lady. And thank you

for making such space available." He adjusted the monocle on his nose as he stared at her. "I had the honour of knowing your father, although I never visited Treadwell Vale. My condolences on his passing."

Barbara dipped her head in acknowledgement. "Thank you, Professor. I'm glad we can now rectify that omission and welcome you to what has become my laboratory."

"I see he passed on his scientific interest," observed Royston. "That is a good thing."

"I certainly hope so." She smiled politely. "But we must not keep you. I am enjoying a quick tour before we land."

"Of course." The Professor bowed once more and turned to one of the other doors, disappearing from view.

"An interesting gentleman," she remarked.

"Indeed," replied Lyle. He resumed walking down the narrow passageway.

Barbara accompanied him, wondering why she felt slightly unsettled. Professor Royston's conversation had been polite and pleasant.

His eyes hadn't. And she was sure they'd not met before, but had the oddest feeling she had heard of him.

She pushed it to the back of her mind as Lyle stopped at the very last door. "My quarters," he nodded at it. "I thought you should see mine instead of anyone else's. I doubt my crew would appreciate us poking around in their private spaces."

"I agree." She touched his arm. "And I'd love to see your quarters, Lyle."

"Here we are." He placed his hand on one of the panels and the door clicked open. "A security measure. It senses the heat and the patterns of my hand."

Barbara gasped as light flooded her eyes and she forgot about everything but the view. They were at the very back of the ship and there were wide windows here too, smaller than those at the helm, but still giving a magnificent view of their surroundings.

"I don't hear the engines. I'm surprised because we must be near the propellers?"

"Excellent sound baffles."

"Indeed."

Looking around, she observed the cleverly constructed features that would make this a pleasant place to spend one's off-duty hours.

There was a bed, resting on what were obviously storage cupboards. Above were shelves and Lyle's boots were neatly arranged there, next to folded towels. The other wall held a built-in desk, more shelves—this time filled with books—and a large fold-down table,

which Lyle explained was for the ever-present maps and charts. Small folding chairs could be used if there were battle conferences, and if not, they were tucked away out of sight.

"It's brilliant," she whispered. "Absolutely brilliant." There was even a comfortable chair which showed signs of having been well-used, and a small couch, both upholstered in rich leather.

"Through there is a small facility for washing and…er…so on."

"It's quite lovely, Lyle. Almost luxurious."

He wrinkled his nose. "If this was a simple transport vessel, then yes, I suppose so. But we're a fighting ship, Barbara. I don't get to sit back and put my feet up too often. All these features are necessary. None more so than this." He pushed down on his bed. "I have lost count of the number of times I've come in here and just collapsed on that for a few hours. The rest?" He shrugged. "I'll make use of what I need when I need it."

"Well, I think it's charming, and you deserve all the comforts you can get, battlefield or not." She walked to him. "Thank you, Lyle. More than I can say. I have no words for what this trip means to me."

"I'm glad." His face softened. "And I'll say that seeing you here, aboard my ship, gives me great pleasure." He reached out to cup her face so easily. So naturally.

She moved into his arms just the same way, as if it was something she'd been doing all her life.

"Lyle," she whispered.

"Oh, Barbara," he murmured back. "I wish I could strip you naked and take you right here, on my bed. Floating above the earth."

"Go ahead," she muttered as he rubbed his cheek against hers. "I'd like nothing better…"

He sighed, his arms pulling her close. "I know." His mouth found hers and once again feasted, a groan of desire in his throat.

She matched it with a sigh of pleasure, allowing her fingers to drift to his neck, angling her head to welcome his plunging tongue.

Within moments she was on her back, bouncing on his mattress, enjoying the weight of him crushing her in the most wonderful of ways.

She knew not a moment's hesitation, but spread her legs wide, settling around him, feeling his arousal as he pressed into her heat.

His hands were everywhere and daringly she let hers drift beneath his jacket to his backside. Scarcely aware of what she was doing, she pulled down, pushing his groin into hers and whimpering as their bodies met. She kissed him ferociously, her body dictating every move, every twist and turn as they tumbled together.

Suddenly a loud horn sounded, and the two bodies froze, Lyle jerking up and staring at Barbara.

“God, woman. This won’t do at all.” He pulled away, straightened his jacket and looked at her. “I want you far too much. And I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not. I just know you’re dangerous.” He turned away. “That was our arrival alert. I’ll be at the helm.”

He left the room in quite a hurry.

Barbara blinked, edged carefully off the bed and onto her feet, pulling her clothing back into place. Lyle had a small mirror on one wall, so she smoothed her hair and made sure the lace on her collar was straight.

Tidy once more, she stood for a moment, staring from the window as the earth slowly rose up to meet them.

This would be Bristlewood, she thought, noticing the tall and unusual bare trees that marked that particular forest. It was barely a mile from Treadwell Vale. So the next thing she should see should be the ruins of Bristlewood Abbey—and there they were, not too far off, on her right.

She frowned.

What was it…she’d seen *something*…

Whipping out her goggles, she slid them over her head. Sure enough, she saw it again, but not clearly enough to identify it. There must be something metallic down there, amongst the ruins. She could see the glitter. And then it was gone. No, wait, it was back, as if…as if someone had walked in front of it.

What the *devil*…?

Chapter Seven

Aurelia Elkins threw propriety to the winds and jumped down from the seat in front of the horse-wagon, rushing to Barbara, giving her a huge hug. “I can’t believe you *flew*,” she gushed. “Was it as wonderful as you imagined? Where is the airship? Did you get sick being up there floating around?”

“Yes, over there, and no.” Barbara laughed. “Come inside and I’ll tell you everything. You must be tired.”

“Not at all,” Aurelia enthused. “We had a smooth trip, the weather is lovely, and Marguerite seems very happy to be here.” She turned to watch Rowland as he fussed over his favourite mare.

“And the little boy is happy to be anywhere,” observed Barbara. “Look at him go.”

They both took a moment to enjoy the antics of a not-quite-seven-day-old foal frisking around in the small paddock.

“He’s rather beautiful, isn’t he?” Barbara smiled at the frolicking, leggy lad.

“Oh yes,” sighed Aurelia. “I’m completely in love with him.”

“Well, I hate to interrupt your minute of bliss, but you should come inside. Rowland will bring your bags.”

“No, no, I couldn’t ask…”

“Silly. He’ll have a footman do it. I just meant you don’t have to worry about it.”

Aurelia sighed again. “I’m so excited, my mind isn’t quite all together yet. But I could use a cup of tea and a bit of a wash too. I’m sure I’m grubby after the drive.”

“Nearly three hours on the box of a wagon? Yes, I should think so. We have water and tea. Come.” She grabbed her friend’s hand and urged her away from the field toward Treadwell Vale.

It was a charming sight too, in the spring sunshine.

The gardens were extensive and well maintained, but not particularly a showplace like its more famous counterparts. And the same could be said for the building itself. Nicely proportioned, with a splendid drive, it radiated contentment rather than glamour.

The windows shone, the marble columns gleamed, and to Barbara it was home. There were over twenty bedrooms, lots of servants’ quarters on the top floor, and all the other accoutrements of a solid English manor.

Barbara loved all of it, even the few squeaky stairs, and the one room that never seemed to warm up in the winter. She’d grown up here, with only occasional visits to London, so this was far more of a

home to her, even though she now managed both houses.

"You're in your usual room, Aurelia," she pointed up the stairs. "And Imelda's next door. She'll be here early tomorrow."

"I can't wait. I'll only be two shakes of a lamb's tail…"

Barbara chuckled as her friend hurried up the stairs. Aurelia wasn't what one would call a restful person; she liked action, movement…she was a breath of fresh air sometimes, and an exhausting gale-force wind at others. But she was one of the two people in the world that Barbara felt close to, and that mattered more than anything else.

Having her here and knowing Imelda would be down tomorrow… it was just marvellous.

And also knowing that Lyle would be staying as well? That was truly the *cerise* on top of a delicious *gâteau*.

Since it was a warm day, Barbara had a table brought outside onto the terrace, and when Aurelia reappeared, tea was ready, along with some tasty-looking pastries.

"Ooh, you read my mind," she smiled. "I didn't realise how hungry I was until a few minutes ago."

Barbara poured. "Go ahead. Enjoy now, before Rowland arrives and polishes off the entire plate."

"Well, he's earned it," observed Aurelia. "It took a bit of time to get the horses into the wagon, and the little one didn't like it at all."

"Have you not named him yet? I thought that sort of thing was all done in advance."

"Oh, it is. He'll be officially entered into the studbook as Dark Dancer, out of Black Dandy and Marguerite Dawn. But you can't possibly call him Dark Dancer as an everyday name. He's far too much fun for that sober title." She munched down on a raspberry tart and moaned with pleasure.

"Good, aren't they?" Barbara took two. "So what are you and Rowland calling him?"

"Pip."

Rowland's voice made the two women jump, and he grinned as he emerged onto the terrace, looking a bit damp, but quite cheerful. "Lord, I'm starving. Had to clean up first, of course." He eagerly filled his plate as Barbara poured him a cup of tea.

"Pip." Aurelia glanced at him. "I like that. He is indeed a real pip of a lad." She chuckled. "Leave it to you to find the perfect name."

Barbara found herself watching Rowland and Aurelia as they chatted in the afternoon sun. She envied them the ease of their conversation, the simple give and take as they exchanged thoughts and opinions on horses in general and young Pip in particular.

She'd shared her flight experiences, laughed with them when she described Lyle's hat throwing skills, and even Rowland had expressed

an interest in going up in one. Aurelia wasn't so sure and declared she'd rather have a horse underneath her than a few hundred feet of air. Rowland had laughed and agreed.

They were not unlike old friends, or even an old married couple.

That notion hit her like a brick, and she bobbled her cup against the saucer.

"Barbara? Are you all right?" Aurelia blinked at her.

"Yes, I'm fine." She managed a chuckle. "It's probably all the excitement of the day."

"Of course. I can understand that."

"I think I should perhaps go and make sure all is underway for this evening." She stood. "Lyle will be joining us, so…there are things to be seen to." She eased away from the table. "I'll see you both then."

"Excellent." Rowland nodded and took more pies. "Get some rest too, Barbara. We're here to relax, don't forget."

She smiled and waved, already halfway back into the house. She would indeed have a word with Cook and Killigrew, but she knew everything would be well in hand. As she walked up the stairs, an idea formed in her mind.

She had plenty of time to take a refreshing walk through the woods. Perhaps she could find out exactly what had caught her attention in the Bristlewood ruins, and also give some consideration to the possibility that Rowland and Aurelia would be an excellent match.

~*~

The *Morrigan* had settled into her new environment like the goddess she was named after, mused Lyle, walking backwards from the mooring and looking up at the mighty machine. She definitely reclined into the countryside berth.

She had lots of space all to herself, a very sturdy tree to hold her fore ropes and the protection of the nearby forest if the winds picked up. All in all, she was quite safe for the few days they'd be at Treadwell Vale.

The crew would happily live aboard, since they had their own quarters and an inn less than a mile away in Middlevale. Fresh supplies were already on their way from the kitchens, courtesy of Rowland and Barbara.

For his part, he would be joining his hosts for dinner, and seeing *her* again, let alone staying in the same house.

He mentally scolded himself. She was taking up far too many of his

thoughts these days. He needed to focus on matters at hand, not reminisce about their kisses, and the feel of her body next to his.

As dreams of her drifted through his mind, the sight of something or someone moving stealthily along the edge of the forest caught his eye. Sure enough, it was Barbara, in an old gown and bonnet, making her way into the wood, carrying a basket.

Curious, he forgot about his resolution to stay focused, and hurried across the field to follow her. She had already vanished into the shade, but he had a good idea which way she'd gone, so it was a simple decision to take the same path and find out where she was headed.

Perhaps she was going to pick berries? The basket would suggest that. Or maybe mushrooms, although something in his memory reminded him that those were best harvested at dawn.

He caught sight of her skirt as she strode briskly now, and knew he was on the right track.

And soon the forest opened again, presenting him with a fine view of a large set of ruins. He recalled seeing them from above as they'd glided downward into their landing field. She trod carefully toward them over the bumpy turf, her pace slowing, her head moving from side to side as if she were searching for something.

He stayed in the shadows of the trees, watching her. Her movements were assured, and most unlike anyone looking for mushrooms.

Suddenly she stopped dead in her tracks, peering down. Then she dropped to her knees and out of his sight.

Enough was enough. He hurried over the intervening ground, heedless of whether she saw him or not. But he need not have worried; her head was bent as she ran her hands over the turf at the base of one of the smaller piles of stone.

"Hullo, Barbara. Lose something?"

Her head jerked up, her eyes wide. "Dammit, Lyle," she swore. "Don't creep up on someone like that."

"I didn't creep and you aren't someone." He closed the distance between them. "What are you doing?"

She leaned back on her heels and sighed. "I'm looking for something."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"Good place to start. Why here?"

She pursed her lips. "All right. I'll tell you. As we flew in this morning, and you were at the helm, I was still in your quarters gazing down at our descent. And as we went over these ruins, I saw something."

"What?" he asked again.

She shook her head. “I’m not sure. A reflection. A flash. A mirror perhaps, or metal, maybe.”

“And you’re sure it was here?” He joined her, looking at the ground.

“Almost. If not here, then within a few feet. I recall seeing the shadow of these stones.” She stood. “The shadow. Hmm.” She paced out a few more steps away from the ruin.

And paused. “Lyle? Come here…”

He was at her side in an instant, following her gaze.

And there, on the grass, was a very clear marking. A straight line running across their path from one ancient stone to another.

“What the devil is *that*?”

~*~

Barbara was down on her knees once more, running her fingers along the clear demarcation in the grass. “I’m not sure…” She felt, rather than saw, Lyle squat down beside her.

“Wait,” she held her breath. “There’s something here…”

As she ran her fingertips along the line a third time, she paused at the sensation of regular little bumps. “Here…” It was under both her forefingers, about two feet apart.

Going with instinct, she pressed down, gasping as a square of turf rose of its own accord, like the lid of a box. The rivets holding the thing together must have been what she’d felt beneath her fingers.

“Good God,” muttered Lyle. “What the blazes am I looking at?”

Barbara was equally shocked. The opening revealed a large container of what appeared to be mechanical equipment. There were rollers and gears and a variety of wires, some of which she recognised, also several tubes and valves that were tucked along one side.

What the folded mass of metal links could be, she had no idea.

“These are power tubes,” she pointed to the fretwork of shiny copper cylinders lining one side of the pit. “If I do this…” she gently turned a valve, “then that should turn on the power to the whatever-it-is.”

“Careful…” Lyle’s hand rested on her arm. It was oddly comforting, but she wasn’t terribly concerned about what she saw.

“I am,” she reassured him. “But this is all mechanical equipment. I see no danger for us…”

Power began to illuminate various portions of the device, and she watched the circuits make their connections. As they did so, the metal links in the centre started to rattle.

"Hmm."

"Barbara. Please. Move back a little? One never knows…"

His voice was strained, and she appreciated the trust he'd put in her thus far. There was no need to strain it, so she rose and stepped back.

Her assumption was correct. There was nothing dangerous about this machine. There was, however, a surprise in store for both of them.

The links assembled themselves into a rod, cleverly interlocking and rising from the ground. Both of them stepped back as the rod grew higher and higher until it slowed and stopped at about eight feet from the ground. At that point a delicate tracery of what looked like gold lace emerged from the top, forming a perfect circle.

"Good God, it's an antenna of some sort." Lyle's eyes were wide.

"I think you're right," she frowned. "How odd." Then a sound caught her attention, and she turned her head to one side. "Oh, Lyle… *look*…"

All around them, tiny versions of the lacy metal circle appeared. One on top of a pile of stones, others on tree branches…they twinkled and flashed in the sunlight.

"That's what I saw. Or at least one of these," she murmured, fascinated at the array that had emerged.

"I don't understand this," Lyle muttered. "What's going on?"

Barbara thought for a moment. "If we assume that this is an antenna, then our next question should be…"

"Is it sending or receiving?" Lyle stared at the assembly. "And I can't help wondering why here? Why out in the middle of a ruined church, miles from anything?"

Barbara thought about that, staring again at the twinkly circles. "Lyle, does it seem to you that all these lacy bits…if you look at them as a whole…" She shaped them with her hands, sweeping over each one. "It's a *circle*."

"I'll go you one better. It's a saucer." He followed her example. "And the one on top of the rod…"

"Is dead centre." She finished his sentence.

"Right then." He nodded. "So where is it pointing?" He tapped the tiny chronometer on his sleeve and switched it to a compass. Then he moved it around a little.

Barbara leaned in. "It's pointing east-south-east."

Lyle nodded, frowning in thought. He raised his head and looked in that direction, as did Barbara, but there was little to see but trees.

He walked away a few steps, turned, consulted his compass again, and did the same thing in the other direction. "I'll be damned."

"What?" Barbara walked to his side. "What?"

"This whole arrangement? It's pointing directly at *Rumble Hill*."

Barbara's mind froze for a few moments. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." He pointed at the compass. "From where we are now, Rumble Hill is that way." He extended his arm in the same direction as the saucer.

"Goodness," she murmured. "And why would that be, I wonder?"

"A lot depends on what that thing does. But my first guess would be that it is eavesdropping on our transmissions."

"Hmm." She moved back toward the hole in the ground. "That would require a receiver and some other parts, either something to record the transmissions or pass them along to somewhere else." She paused. "Or someone else."

Lyle shook his head. "I know very little about this kind of machinery," he observed ruefully. "Give me an airship and I'll field strip its engines, clean them, and have it back in the air before you've finished dinner. But this?" He waved his hand at the array, "this isn't familiar at all."

Barbara waved that aside. "Luckily, you have me here." She went back down on her knees to peer into the box of curiosities. "If it's all right with you, I'm going to turn off the power and shut the antenna down."

"Please do. I'd rather not alert whoever has set this up that we've discovered his machine."

"Good point." Barbara reversed the valve and watched as the system slowly retreated into itself and all the little glowing circles dimmed and vanished. "There must be tiny receptors where those little circles are," she muttered, more to herself than Lyle.

"Should we shut it off completely, do you think? Can you do that?"

She nodded. "Eventually, yes. Although I'd like to come back when I have more time and dig around in it before we deactivate it. But for now, let me take a quick look and see if there's anything else in there that looks familiar."

Leaning over, she delicately moved bits and pieces to one side or another, tapped here and there, and then lay flat to reach down as far as she could. "Aha."

"Aha what?" Lyle paced beside her as she continued her investigation.

"Found something." She glanced at him. "Get me a screwdriver from my basket, would you?"

Lyle looked around, located the basket and pulled the cover off the top. "God. I'm not sure what berries you planned on picking, but they must have been very securely attached to the bush."

He raised a pair of large metal cutters.

Barbara laughed. "It's a handy disguise for my tools."

"Here's your screwdriver." He held it out. "Right size?"

"It adjusts." She dipped back down with it.

"Of *course* it does." He muttered under his breath.

"I heard that." She fiddled with the straps securing a small box. "Am I damaging your masculine image?"

He snorted. "Not at all. Although I shall remind myself to check the fittings on the *Morrigan* if you come aboard with anything like that basket…"

She laughed as she released the box and eased herself away from the edge of the pit. "Right. That's it. Let's see if this returns to the ground cleanly." Rising to her knees, she gently pulled the square of turf and its metallic backing toward her, smiling as it slowly descended downward, eventually clicking into place.

Unless one was looking specifically for it, it was almost invisible.

"Excellent," she declared. "Time to go, I believe."

Lyle held out his hand as she rose. "What have you there?"

She let him help her stand, put the little box in the basket and brushed off her skirts. "Muddy streaks on my gown, but down here at the Vale, nobody will think anything of it." She grinned at him. "I'm a bit of a tomboy when it comes down to it. And the fields and the woods…not to mention the lake…I'm always grubby."

"Not surprising." He rolled his eyes. "But you didn't answer my question. What was it that you pulled out from that machine?"

She looked at him, understanding that he was not only attractive and very intelligent but also very patient. Not many men would have stood by while she delved into things of which they knew little or nothing.

"I think I know what it is," she answered as they walked away from the ruins. "But I'd be much happier if you'd let me verify my assumption before telling you."

Lyle took the basket from her hand and intertwined their arms. "Very well. I can wait. But not for long."

"After dinner." She smiled. "I promise I'll show you after dinner. Besides, you have yet to see the laboratory. So we'll kill two birds with one stone."

"And Rowland won't mind?"

"Aurelia's here. They will probably spend most of the evening at the stables, making sure that Marguerite and her little one, who I'm told is now named Pip, are doing well in their new home."

He chuckled. "It's good to have such caring parents."

She laughed back. "It is indeed. And you will need quite a bit of time to take a look at my laboratory and see if you think it satisfactory for your technicians."

"I am sure it will be." He squeezed her arm. "Everything here is

more than sufficient for us."

Unwilling to read more into that comment than he might have intended, she merely nodded. "I hope so." It would certainly be interesting to watch his reaction when she showed him her *real* laboratory.

The one that only she knew about…

Chapter Eight

Rowland and Aurelia were already enjoying glasses of sherry when Lyle was shown in by Killigrew.

"Commander Meredith, my Lord," he bowed, his voice resounding throughout the room.

Lyle's lips twitched. It wasn't as if he'd just arrived from Paris with an entourage of twelve and three well-trained Pomeranians. But to listen to the man, one could easily imagine that to be the case.

"Lyle. Good. Come have sherry." Rowland's eyes reflected Lyle's humour.

"Thank you." He walked to the tray and accepted the glass that Rowland had just filled. "Miss Elkins. Good evening." He bowed and saluted her with a bow. "May one inquire as to the health of the livestock? Marguerite and her newborn?"

Rowland smiled happily as they took their seats and began a litany of little Pip's virtues. As he did so, Lyle took the opportunity to observe Miss Elkins.

She was, in essence, the perfect guest. She laughed in the right places, nodded at appropriate moments, and expressed her own thoughts now and again when the occasion presented itself.

Her blonde hair was neatly tucked into some sort of net thing, with only a few wisps escaping to frame her attractive face. Blue eyes and a shapely form completed the picture.

And yet…Lyle couldn't help sensing there was more to this young lady than might at first appear.

As the conversation drifted, he chose his moment. "Tell me, Miss Elkins. I gather you are interested in horses. Do you have your own stable?"

A slight blush filled her cheeks. "No, sad to say." The smile was back. "We are not fortunate enough to have a country home. Just the house in London." She gave a tiny shrug. "But I've been very lucky in having friends who will cater to my equine obsession. Both Barbara and Rowland have been so generous with their time, their horses, and their houses."

"I'm sure it was as much a pleasure for them as it has been for you," answered Lyle encouragingly.

"I hope so," she agreed.

"This woman has a gift, Lyle. I've never seen one horse, no matter how ugly a temper it might have, fail to respond to her. It really is a marvel."

“Who’s a marvel? Aurelia? You must be talking about horses.” Barbara erupted into the room, chestnut curls flying, skirts and petticoats swinging with her determined stride. “So sorry I’m behind, but my tramp in the woods did terrible things to my hair and Jennie insisted it needed a wash.” She walked to her brother. “I have time for a quick sherry, I think. Do be a dear and pour me one?”

Lyle shook his head. “Tramping around the forests indeed. Most ladies satisfy themselves with a decorous afternoon stroll.”

“Thank God I’m not most ladies,” she quipped back. “Decorum and I are not terribly well-acquainted.”

“And we’re thankful for it,” endorsed Aurelia. “I can’t imagine those decorous strolls either. There’s far too much to see and do. And pretty walking dresses simply aren’t up to a trip to the stable or a walk across a paddock. Either of which I’d prefer to an idle meander under the chestnut trees.”

Barbara laughed and turned to Lyle. “You see? Here at Treadwell Vale, we leave decorum at the front door.

He raised an eyebrow. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

It was a somewhat provocative response, and he was pleased to note that her gaze slid away from his and was followed by a slight blush.

“Are we going to be able to visit your laboratory after dinner?” He hoped that promised treat was still possible, but needed to know that Rowland approved. Decorum or not, there were some rules that had to be observed. Prowling around a country estate at night unchaperoned was one of them.

Barbara glanced at her brother. “I promised Lyle a tour, Rowland. After all, he and his crew are here to use the laboratory and time is pressing on this matter of bombings.”

Rowland waved his hand. “Of course. Anything we can do to help, Lyle. Barbara has a good solid setup, I believe. And with luck your men will be able to make good use of it.”

“And you’re wanting to take a last look at Marguerite and Pip, I’m sure.” Barbara chuckled.

“We do have to make sure they’re well settled for the night. It’s been a trying day for both of them,” said Aurelia. “After all, Pip isn’t even a week old yet.”

“I completely understand, darling.” Barbara kept her face straight. “But no setting up a bunk in the stables. I doubt our grooms would appreciate it.”

Aurelia grinned. “Don’t think it hasn’t crossed my mind.”

Barbara rolled her eyes. But before she could utter the comment obviously trembling on her lips, Killigrew returned, looking even more sombre.

“Dinner is served, my Lord.” His scornful glance around at the rest of them reduced them all to mere cyphers in the grandiose scheme of His Lordship’s life.

“Oh, jolly good. I’m starved,” said his Lordship, unaware of his elevated position in the eyes of his butler. “Let’s go and pop on the old feed bag, eh?”

~*~

Dinner passed far too slowly for Barbara’s liking, although the food was delicious as always. At least there were fewer courses than would be served at most London homes that evening, let alone any of the banquets that were probably underway. She finished her dessert, eating sparingly of the Victoria sandwich and keeping it to one helping of syllabub. She enjoyed sweets, but too many made her lethargic.

This was not a night for lethargy.

It appeared that Lyle had also eaten his fill, since he had shaken his head at any of the desserts. Their gazes met shortly after, and Barbara pushed away from the table.

“Well, my dears, if you will excuse us, Lyle and I have a laboratory to visit. And I know you’ll both be eager to check on your four-legged family members.”

Aurelia laughed. “You tease us so, but please note that neither Rowland nor I have made any such comments about your interest in science as an after-dinner entertainment.”

“To each his own, Miss Elkins,” chuckled Lyle. “I enjoy horses as well, but to compare them to a laboratory is close to heresy in my world.”

“We’ll agree to differ,” offered Rowland. “After all, it makes our conversations so much more interesting.”

“Indeed it does.” Barbara was already on her feet, shooting glances at Lyle. “If you’re ready?”

“I am.”

He followed her from the room, lengthening his pace to keep up with her. “I support the notion of walking off a fine meal with a brisk walk, but a gallop is a little beyond me at this moment.”

She slowed, an apologetic smile on her face. “I’m sorry. But I am excited to show you my laboratory.”

“And I am excited to see it. Just let me catch my breath. Otherwise, I might keel over before we get there.” He turned toward the front door.

“This way, Lyle. We do not need to go outside.”

Obediently, he followed her, but with a slight frown. “I thought you said it was apart from the main house?”

“It is.”

She opened a narrow door at the very end of the hallway, one so cleverly designed as to be almost invisible to anyone not looking for it. Closing it behind her, she reached into a little nook and picked up a candle, which she lit with a tiny Lucifer device built into the wall. Then she took Lyle’s hand and began to lead him down a cramped passageway. The candlelight flickered, and they walked in the near-dark.

“I take it you’re used to this?” Lyle caught his foot on something. “Oof.”

“Yes. Sorry, I should’ve warned you. There is a board there that has warped over time.”

“Has this always been here?”

“Ever since we’ve lived here, yes. And Treadwell came to our branch of the Withersham line several generations ago.”

The walk continued. “So how old…”

“Goodness, Lyle. You are full of questions tonight.”

“Are you surprised?” He countered. “I’ve just had a lovely dinner in a very elegant dining room. Now, not five minutes later, I’m apparently on a pilgrimage to somewhere I don’t know along a dark passage beneath that same elegant dining room and God knows what else.”

“Patience, dear sir. Only a few more moments…”

His sigh gave way to a murmur as the end of the tunnel approached in the shape of a doorway, lit around three edges by whatever lay beyond.

Barbara snuffed the candle and put it into a holder on the wall, then opened the door. “Welcome to my laboratory, Lyle.”

He walked through, and she watched his face, shining in the soft blue light that filled the high ceilings.

“The glowing tubes are my own creation. Only for the night, of course. During the day we use these.” Barbara touched a control on a wall-mounted panel and the blue tubes changed to a bright yellow-white. “Close to sunlight. Enough so that no matter what the hour, I can see what I’m doing.”

Lyle was silent, his eyes wide, staring around the space thus revealed. “This is…extraordinary.” He shot Barbara a quick look. “May I wander?”

“Of course.”

She watched him as he strolled from worktop to worktop, bench to bench, covering a room the size of a small ballroom. Which at one

time it probably was. Now, its roof lines shielded by thick shrubs and trees, there was little to indicate its presence from the outside.

Inside, it was her domain.

"You have an astounding assortment of equipment, Barbara," commented Lyle, admiring several control panels. "I have to confess I don't have the first idea of what all this stuff does."

"No matter," she replied kindly. "Your technicians will know. And that's the important thing."

"Agreed." He walked to the windows. "Nicely private too."

"Yes."

"Originally…was it a ballroom? Or a large barn? Perhaps a conservatory? An orangery maybe?"

She moved to his side. "An icehouse? A wine cellar? It could have been any of those, really. We're not sure. Our records go back to the sixteenth century, but we know the Vale was in existence long before that. So the original function of this particular space is debatable. I doubt we'll ever know the truth."

"Well, I'm very impressed. And I thank you for making it available to my crew. It will be of inestimable help."

She nodded. "It is my pleasure, and my duty."

He smiled, took her hand and raised it to his lips. "Nicely put." He kissed her knuckles.

"So." She looked at him. "Would you like to see the rest?"

~*~

"The *rest*?"

"Yes." She turned off the lights, leaving only the faint blue emanating from the ceiling.

Already impressed by the professional and thorough arrangement of the laboratory, Lyle couldn't begin to imagine what she was talking about. So he decided to take the simple route. "Er…I'd love to."

"Good. Follow me."

Once again she led him to a very large cabinet and opened one of the solid doors. It looked just like its twin on the other side and in the middle were shelves holding jars, books, and boxes of other paraphernalia. This time, however, there was no dark passageway, just a set of stone steps leading downward in a smooth curve. A railing ran along the side, and a dim light came from below, so Lyle followed Barbara with one hand clasping the cool iron and his gaze fixed on the back of her head.

She slowed, stopped, and stepped aside, touching something on the

wall.

And light flooded a space that literally made him gasp aloud.

"*God*," he whispered.

Stretching out before him was a room that seemed to have no end. Grey stone walls soared to a ceiling that might well have been pale marble, but it was so high he couldn't tell. The floors were solid, great slabs of something light, but not with the high shine one might expect to see in such a place.

It was palatial, magnificent—and it too featured what looked like experimental equipment.

"Welcome to my private laboratory," said Barbara quietly.

"It's…" He stepped out and looked around. "It's beyond belief…"

"I agree." She moved to a long table and touched something beneath. A brighter light in the ceiling shone downward, illuminating the surface, which held tools, several books, and large scrolls, and more than a few items he didn't recognise. "This is where I do my research. My real work."

Lyle was still transfixed by the scale and the appearance of the massive chamber. He walked to a column and touched it reverently. "Roman?"

"Quite possibly. I discovered it by accident. I think my father had many of these things installed, but I never heard a peep about its existence until I stumbled over the outside entrance some years ago. I didn't mention it, of course, and now he's gone and I can't ask him."

"You were so young," said Lyle. "How could you possibly…" He waved his hands around, apparently at a loss for words.

"Don't underestimate the power of books," she answered. "I had very few friends, Lyle. I had Rowland, and my Nanny. Our family wasn't the sort that welcomed guests, held parties, or socialised very much. While some of the aristocracy might have enjoyed such things, my Papa did not. He took the duties of his title seriously and worked hard at being a conscientious Earl. Which increased the family fortunes and prestige, but didn't do a thing for the socialisation of his children."

"Your Mama?"

"Liked pretty things. Jewellery, flowers, gowns, and sometimes young men. Not her children, unfortunately."

Lyle wished he could see her face better, but she was standing in the shadows still. "I'm sorry. I understand how all that happens, but it doesn't make things any easier, does it?"

"No." She sighed and moved forward. "But it explains my joy at finding this place. I read, Lyle. I learned early and devoured everything I could get my hands on. Rowland showed me the library when I was six. It became my refuge within the year, populated with

friends I could rely on."

Lyle watched her face light up as she spoke of books. Behind that attractive visage was a mind eager to learn, to be filled with knowledge. She fascinated him more and more each day. He doubted that would change with the years; she'd be challenging him to keep up with her as time went by.

And what the *hell* was he thinking? Years? He had a job to do, and not a lot of time for even considering such matters.

"Would you like to see my thonirium?"

He took a breath. "Um, yes. I think so." He looked around. "Should I wear a suit of armour or something?"

"No, silly." Her laugh rippled away throughout the massive stone room. "This way."

The lights above followed her progress, and Lyle glanced up, wondering if she had some sort of detector in the floor or the ceiling.

They passed more workbenches, littered with machines and parts, others filled with items he didn't recognise at all. One held spools of wire in different gauges and colours.

"You are very well equipped," he commented.

"I am lucky," she answered. "Rowland allows me to order the things I need without question. He trusts me, and I trust him." She chuckled. "Right now, he and Aurelia are in the most modern stable you can imagine. I helped him build in some interesting features for the horses, and from that point on he was most accommodating when I needed new supplies or tools."

"A fair bargain." Barbara slowed her pace to stand in front of a large and solid table, topped with what looked like slate. "Believe it or not, this was once a billiards table. They were going to throw it away. Can you imagine?"

Lyle couldn't help a laugh. "You rescued it?"

"I did. A few moments of removing the torn and dusty felt revealed the slate beneath. So I took off the moulding and the pockets, and ended up with the perfect work surface." She reached for a small container. "And here it is."

Instead of unscrewing it, she fiddled with the cap and the whole thing split in half. The interior was lined with black velvet. He frowned at it.

"I don't see anything?"

"Here." She gave him a large magnifying glass.

He pored over the velvet. "Er…it looks like dust."

"That's my thonirium," she answered. "I had five grains. Now I have four."

He put the glass down. "I have to ask. What happened to the fifth grain?"

She waved her hand around at the chamber. “You are standing in the light produced by half a grain of thonirium. I managed to disintegrate the other half. Some experimental work failed.”

He blinked. “Half a grain? That’s a mere speck… How…what…I don’t understand…”

Barbara smiled proudly. “I designed a system that uses the energy thonirium can produce under the correct and controlled circumstances.”

Fortunately there was a stool right behind him, because Lyle felt an immediate need to sit as he heard her words. “No. You can’t do that. Thonirium is an explosive, for God’s sake.”

“I know.”

“I don’t understand…”

“That I also know,” she sighed. “Lyle, it’s late and I do not want to bore you with a lot of technical jargon. Please be assured that I have managed to use thonirium as a power generator. Granted, in a very limited capacity, but my goal is to create a full-sized version that could light a city for years.”

He stared at her, this slip of a girl, unable to fully comprehend the magnitude of her ambitions. And yet, looking into her blue eyes, he saw the flash of brilliance, a glimpse at the genius lurking within. “You’ll do it too, won’t you?”

“I hope so. I really do hope so.” She bit her lip. “I work long hours here, so there’s one last thing I’d like to show you. Will you come this way?”

Lyle stood, not knowing what to expect next. Perhaps she’d invented a time machine. He wouldn’t put it past her if she set her mind to it. But she led him toward the end of the chamber, where the ceiling sloped down to a more normal level. The wall was panelled, the wood dark and aged over time.

“Was this once a wine cellar?” he wondered aloud.

“I’ve often thought that might be the case. Or perhaps an ice house. It’s deep enough. Who knows?”

This time the door was obvious, and she led him through, shutting it behind him and climbing a few steps to another door. “Here’s my sanctuary.”

He followed her into a room, much more ordinary in size, and fitted out to be a combination of study and bedchamber. She lit several candles, illuminating a wonderfully huge old desk, a well-worn chair, and lots of bookshelves. On the other side of the room was a bed, comfortably sized, a few upholstered chairs that looked as if they’d been much-loved for years, and a couch in front of thick curtains.

There were a couple of doors in the walls that Lyle assumed

opened onto cupboards.

"A pleasant retreat," he observed, trying to take it all in. "But don't you miss the sunlight?"

"I could make it, of course," she grinned, "but it would have been a lot of work running the lighting tubes through this wall. And actually, I don't need it."

She strolled to the curtains and reached behind one, pulling a cord and opening them.

A very large group of windows appeared, arched at the top, at least half a dozen. The glass allowed a little moonlight in, and in the daytime it must be quite bright indeed.

"You are endlessly surprising," he walked to her side. "I assume we actually have been walking upward throughout your private laboratory?"

"Just enough to give me daylight in here," she answered. "My theory is that some elevated member of the clergy had these quarters, someone either associated with Bristlewood Abbey, or maybe even before then. Some Roman aristocrat, perhaps. The arches might indicate that, although I'm more inclined toward the early Middle Ages."

Lyle shook his head and looked at her. "You are full of surprises, Barbara. An amazing woman."

She blushed. "Thank you. And thank you for keeping this all to yourself, Lyle. Few know of these facilities, even fewer of my interest in thonirium."

Her face glowed in the soft light of the moon and the few candles, and he stared at her, almost startled at her beauty. It was ever-changing, it seemed. In daylight she was vibrant, alight with purpose and interest.

Now she was mystical, a wraith of a woman with candlelight flickering in her eyes.

"Barbara," he whispered, turning her to face him. "I would never betray your confidences. Ever."

"I know," she answered softly. "I never had any doubts about bringing you down here. None at all."

"Thank you for trusting me," he murmured, his gaze falling to her full lips. Had he ever wanted anything more than this woman at this moment? He didn't think so.

Going with his instinct, he leaned down and kissed her, softly at first, then more passionately.

For a second or two, she was still, but then she made a slight sound and her arms came up around his shoulders and her hands to the back of his neck.

Her lips parted in welcome.

He needed no more encouragement than that…

Chapter Nine

She was falling—tumbling willy nilly into a new world of sensation. Heat, so much heat, his mouth on hers, his tongue, his hands where they held her, and his body against her clothing. She was burning up with need, struggling to get closer, to find his fuel to feed her fire.

Her hands seemed to have developed their own minds, and were busy undoing Lyle's coat, and then tearing his shirt from his breeches to discover, at last, the firm and unyielding flesh beneath. His chest was a landscape she couldn't wait to explore, and he realised her intent, helping her by shucking off everything he could while keeping them locked in the kiss. Breathless, she tore her face from his and gasped, a sound that was half his name and half a moan of pleasure.

"Barbara," he whispered, his voice low and rough. "I want you."

"I want you too," she murmured back, not a moment's hesitation. "Now, Lyle. Here and now." She ran eager palms over his skin, learning the textures of a man's body. The firm ridges, smooth slopes and whorls of hair that thickened to a line moving downward over his chest. She found his nipples, flat discs that fascinated her, gently touching them with her fingertips and sucking in a quick breath as they tightened and hardened beneath her light teasing.

Lyle's hands were busy too, unfastening, unlacing, freeing her from her restrictive clothing. She sighed with pleasure as her corset fell away, hissed with delight as he pushed her skirt down over her hips, and kicked everything aside from her feet, leaving her in her thin petticoat, shoes and stockings.

"God, you're lovely," Lyle breathed as he tugged at the ribbon holding her last garment in place. "I want to see all of you."

"Fair is fair." Barbara reached for the buttons on his breeches.

"It is indeed." He allowed her to loosen them, his teeth a brief flash of white as he smiled. "Are you sure, Barbara?" His hand came up to cradle her chin. "Are you sure?"

She slid his breeches down and let her hands cup his delightfully firm bottom. The sensation was quite extraordinary, and she breathed in slowly, enjoying the sensual pleasures to be gained from the feel of such smooth and solid skin along with the scent of sandalwood and man.

"I'm sure." She kissed him again, knowing he was aroused, unable to miss the firm length pressing against her, finding its place between her thighs.

“Good,” he breathed. “I think it would have killed me if you’d said no.”

She couldn’t help a quick laugh at his words, but it faded into a breath of delight as he swept the last remnants of her clothing away, shed his own, and tugged her to the bed. “I want to play with you, learn you. Find out the places that make you smile, and the ones that drive you mad for me. Because everything about you drives me mad for you.”

She felt his hands on her legs as he slid her stockings and shoes off, and then shivered as those same hands reversed direction. “I think I’d like that,” she mumbled, knowing that every tiny bit of her being was beginning to tingle as his clever fingers did as he’d promised.

He learned her, with kisses, strokes, delicate touches of his skin to hers. He licked and nibbled, scratched gently and sucked places that made her entire body arch with need.

She’d read about lovemaking. She knew exactly what to expect and what was involved. But she could never have imagined the pleasures that came along with the deed.

Nor could she have envisioned her own hunger. While Lyle aroused her, she determined that she would do the same, and what had been a passive moment of extraordinarily wonderful sensations became a shared experience. It was clear that she had to have the same learning moments as Lyle.

He seemed a little surprised at first when she let her hands wander over his body, grazing her nails gently down to find his navel, following the trail of hair even further.

She’d seen images of what lay beneath, statues, paintings, and knew the biological functions. But oh, the wonders of reality far surpassed the words in a book or the marble representations.

The feel of silk over steel, the soft delicacy that hung beneath… Barbara was entranced with Lyle’s masculinity. And, brave soul that he was, he allowed her free rein to explore.

She had no idea how long they lay thus, naked, entwined, touching, kissing, and sighing with pleasure at the discovery of each other’s bodies. The rigid length in her hands told a story of readiness, just as the moisture on her thighs told a story of welcome…

So as Lyle rolled her to her back and rose above her, she parted her legs and raised her arms to him, a mute entreaty for him to fulfil all the needs he’d aroused within her.

He surprised her by touching her gently at first, his fingers seeming to know exactly where. As he rubbed so softly, she caught her breath —a wonderful sensation started to tingle deep inside her.

“Lyle,” she moaned, her hips lifting a little. “Oh Lyle…”

“Yes, yes…”

Hardness replaced fingers, and she knew he was rubbing himself along that hot and aching place, teasing more of those wonderful tingles.

"Barbara," he whispered. "Barbara, it has to be soon. I cannot…"

She spread her thighs wide in answer to his entreaty. "Lyle, I want you. Please. Now…"

He groaned as he settled, finding her ready, the both of them slick and slippery. And then he began to ease his way into her heated flesh.

And her heart…

~*~

Lyle wanted to obey his body's instincts and thrust deep, hard and fast into Barbara's willing and remarkable body. But he was well aware that he was claiming a unique prize. He would do so, there was no question, but he would make sure it was as wonderful for her as it was for him.

He pulled fiercely on the reins of his desire and let nature guide his course, gently but firmly possessing her most intimate places, causing as little pain as possible.

She flinched once, and he immediately paused. "Are you all right?"

She sighed. "A slight pinch, nothing of note. Now…? Please… *more*."

He would not—could not—refuse her.

And so Commander Lyle Meredith began to express his deepest needs and wants within the body of Lady Barbara Treadwell.

She was fire and silk, tight and flowering just for him, the petals within her unfurling at his touch. She seemed instinctively to understand his rhythm, matching his pacing, the two of them rising and falling together in mutual bliss.

And bliss it was.

Her moans of delight, his groans of need, the sound of their bodies mated in perfect union…a timeless and universal symphony of lovers.

It seemed eternal, this sensual joy, this erotic and exquisite dance, and when she tightened around him, beneath him, her legs clasping his body in fierce abandon, he lost his control and plunged deep, taking, claiming what he'd known would be his from the first moment he laid eyes on her.

She cried out then, muscles taut, back arched, her eyes blindly staring at him as she flew deep into the maelstrom engulfing them both.

The spasms within her proved the last straw for his control and he

followed her, tumbling off the highest cliff and spinning free, lost and yet found. He clung to his sanity by a fine thread, knowing he and Barbara were together in the most magnificent realm of sensual abandon.

"Lyle," she moaned as her skin slid over his and her body turned boneless. "Oh *Lyle*…"

He gently eased away, rolling to her side and gathering her in his arms. "Yes, Barbara. God, *yes*."

They lay entwined for a while, racing hearts slowing at last, naked skin against naked skin, warm and relaxed. His body sated, Lyle simply cuddled her, unsure now of what to say, worried he might have hurt her in his frenzied need to possess her.

"Are you all right?" he finally asked.

"Never better," she replied, turning within his arms to look at him. "Never better than this moment, Lyle." She smiled and lifted a hand to run it through his hair. "I knew what to expect. But not what it would feel like." She sighed. "The enormity of it. The wonder…I had no idea." She tugged a little on the tuft wrapped around her fingers. "Is it always like that?"

He smiled back. "It should be. But I will confess that it's never been quite like that for me either."

She blinked. "I hope that's a good thing?"

"It is." He leaned over and kissed her lightly. "A very good thing."

She released his hair and snuggled into his chest. "I'm glad."

Lyle stilled. This instant, this woman, the way she had tucked herself into his arms…he was suddenly blinded by the truth of the moment.

"Barbara," he began, not sure what words would be next but knowing they had to be said, "You know what this means, of course."

"I do?"

"Yes," he nodded and tapped her nose with his finger. "You and I, Lady Treadwell, are now affianced. We will make a polite announcement sometime soon, and then plan our wedding."

"I…"

"No arguments, please. We may have just created our child. Marriage is the only option for us." He kissed the nose he'd tapped. "There's also the fact that I'm in love with you and cannot imagine feeling like this about anyone else. Actually," he paused for a moment. "I don't think I've ever felt this way before, so you're going to have to marry me, because I know I won't ever feel like this again."

For Barbara, lying naked and comfortable in Lyle's arm, his words floated around her ears as she tried to absorb their meaning.

"Um…"

"Look, I…"

"No wait," she picked up his hand and threaded her fingers through his. "Let me think a little."

He remained blessedly silent.

This, she realised, was one of those moments that would define her life. There had already been one or two—the death of her parents being the most serious. The decisions made at times like these truly did affect the course of one's future, so they deserved the most intense concentration.

Part of her wanted to sit up and tell Lyle that absolutely no engagement or marriage was necessary. That she was a grown woman capable of making her own choices, and their lovemaking occurred with her full cooperation. There was no need whatsoever for him to play the gallant knight and offer to marry her, or protest his sincere affections.

She allowed that bit of her brain to run rampant for a few minutes, listening to all the valid arguments, knowing they were an intrinsic part of who she was.

Then she sighed, turned over, and looked at him, his grey eyes so kind and gentle as he gazed at her, clearly worrying about what her answer to his proposal would be. Her heart moved. It distinctly moved, shifting ever so slightly at the sight of him. And then, right then at that instant, she knew what she would say.

"Yes. Yes, Lyle. I'll marry you. And I'll do my damndest to love you every bit as much as you love me every day we're together." She squeezed his hand. "I just can't imagine my life without you."

Needless to say, her declaration brought a smile to Lyle's lips.

"In that case, my darling, I suggest we pledge ourselves to each other most fully." His gaze wandered over her body. "And in the truest sense of the words."

She grinned. "Again?"

"Can you?"

"Oh yes…yes indeed…"

~*~

"When on *earth* did all this happen?"

Lady Imelda Eastchurch stared at the smiling group around the breakfast table the following morning. She had just handed her hat and gloves to Killigrew, walked into the dining room, and found Rowland, Barbara, Aurelia and Lyle celebrating with champagne.

"It goes very well with scones, you know." Aurelia grinned at her friend.

“Come and sit, Imelda, and you shall hear all.” Barbara drew out the chair next to her.

“I’d better. And make it snappy.” She glared at Barbara. “I’m not sure I approve of you picking a husband and getting engaged in less time than it takes for a chicken to lay and egg, and on top of *that* not telling *me* about your intentions.”

“I…” Barbara opened her mouth to reply, but was forestalled by her fiancé.

“You must place the blame squarely at my door, Lady Imelda. I was smitten. Instantly smitten. And I am gifted with great powers of persuasion. Lady Barbara couldn’t say no.”

Aurelia chuckled. “That is quite true. But I think the smitten stuff was pretty equal on both sides.”

“Hmph.” Imelda snorted and held out her glass for champagne. “Well, I think it was most high-handed of you. You couldn’t even wait a day for me to get here?”

“Dearest Imelda,” laughed Barbara. “You are among the very first to know. We only just told Rowland and Aurelia, although I suspect Lyle had a few words with Rowland earlier.” She cocked an eyebrow at her brother.

“He did,” nodded Rowland. “Very concise and to the point. He told me he was marrying Barbara whether I liked it or not, and that she’d already said yes. Being a man of great acuity and sensibility, I simply shook his hand, offered him my congratulations and wished him luck.” He glanced at his sister. “Which he’s going to need. By the barrel.”

“Oh Rowland, come on now. I’m not that bad. Am I?” Barbara peeked at him.

He looked at Lyle. “Her childhood nickname was Menace. You have been suitably warned.”

“*Menace*?” Lyle looked distraught. “It’s not too late to cry off, isn’t it?”

Barbara thumped him soundly as everyone dissolved into laughter.

Finally, Imelda settled to her breakfast, declaring herself starved since she’d fled town at some ungodly hour. The conversation flew fast amongst the three women, with Aurelia talking about Pip, Barbara talking about airships, and Imelda talking about her newest book, an Air Brigade mystery.

And often all at once.

Rowland shot a stare at Lyle, and the two of them had taken themselves off soon thereafter, occasioning only a nod from the ladies deep in conversation.

Imelda took a second or two to look at Barbara as their chatter slowed. “You’re glowing, you know.”

Barbara's eyebrows rose in surprise. "I am?"

"She's right. Yes, you are." Aurelia confirmed. "You're happy."

"I believe I am. Very happy."

Imelda nodded, relieved. "That's a weight off my mind. I thought for a moment you'd done something silly like let him have his way with you, and now you were forced into marriage."

Barbara's lips curved into a smile. "Well, yes and no."

The silence dropped over the table with an almost solid thud.

Then Imelda grinned and leaned close, just as Aurelia moved her chair to Barbara's other side.

"Do tell us *all* about it…"

~*~

It was mid-afternoon before Barbara had a moment to herself. Which she seized immediately, since she had a project that needed accomplishing and it was nestled into one of her skirt pockets.

Her friends had elected to walk to the paddock so that Imelda could see for herself how wonderful little Pip was. Rowland was escorting them, and Lyle had returned to the airship to attend to business there.

So it was that Barbara found herself alone, and heading for the laboratory. She knew that the technicians had already set up shop, and she was eager to take a look at what they were doing. If they'd let her look, of course.

Walking into the large room and seeing it filled with people busy at workbenches was quite a shock to one used to the silence of the space, but it warmed her heart to see how easily they fit in to her environment.

She received polite nods, smiles and greetings, so Lyle had done his job well. Nobody seemed to resent her presence or question the fact that a woman was asking about their experiments. But then again, these were men who had devoted their lives to science. And doubtless they were aware of the many women now defying tradition and doing the same.

At the end was an older gentleman, a frown on his face as he stared at what looked like rubbish in front of him.

"Good afternoon," said Barbara quietly, glancing at the name embroidered on his white coat. "You seem troubled, Mr Pell."

He rubbed his hand through his hair. "You've a sharp eye, Ma'am," he said. "I am indeed troubled." He pointed at a piece of material on the table. "Take a good look at this."

“All right.” She leaned over. It seemed like a fragment of bent and torn metal, and she said so.

“It is,” he replied. “But it shouldn’t be.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It shouldn’t be this clean. Look.” He gestured to the end of the worktable where a large magnifier sat. “Put it under there and tell me what you see.”

Obediently, she did as she was told, then flicked the light switch and peered down through the glass. “Hmm.” She frowned. “The edges are vastly distorted. And the material itself looks as if it’s been stretched in strange ways. But it is otherwise untouched. There are no signs of what might have caused such degradation…” She paused and then shot the technician a sharp look. “This is debris from one of the bombings, isn’t it, Mr Pell.” It was not a question.

He stared at her. “Yes. Well done, Ma’am. I’m surprised you recognised it, but in light of what the Commander said about you, I probably shouldn’t be.”

She waved the compliment aside. “You’d expect to see some abrasion, wouldn’t you? Some indication of where the explosive was in relation to this piece, a pattern of markings made by the blast.”

“Exactly.” He nodded. “But once again, I’m seeing what I’ve seen too often of late. Metals ripped apart and yet clean as a whistle.”

Barbara picked up the shard and returned it to its original place. “May I ask what and where this piece came from? Could it have been protected in some way from the full force of the blast?”

He nodded and reached under the table. “I’ve a complete one here. It’s a high-power receiver like the ones we use regularly on our airships. It sits next to a transmitter and the two units work together. It isn’t housed in anything protective…we haven’t needed to even think of that up until now. There are always spares, although I believe this one might have been a Royston special.”

“Oh, I met Professor Royston on the trip down. He designs a lot of airship parts, does he?”

“Indeed, yes. Much of our current science is due to his brilliance. He’s here too, somewhere, but he doesn’t like to work with the rest of us. He usually prefers a solitary table. Says it helps him think if it’s quiet.”

“He’s not here?” Barbara looked around.

“I don’t know where he is, to be honest,” Pell answered. “But wherever he is, I doubt he’s having any better luck than we are.”

She managed some sort of sympathetic murmur, but her gaze was fixed on the transmitter unit he’d brought up from under the table. Something about it was familiar, and her hand moved to touch the little box in her pocket. “This is quite remarkable,” she said casually,

leaning over the desk for a closer look. “A transmitter and a receiver, you say?”

He nodded. “Miniaturised. Very efficient.” He shrugged. “I heard that the Professor has made an even smaller prototype, but I haven’t seen that one yet. He keeps that sort of stuff quiet until it’s been approved by the Air Brigade boffins.”

“I can imagine,” she commented, turning the unit over in her hand. Fingers busy, she felt the unusual indentations and protrusions, some clearly designed for connecting wires on one end.

The gaps and bumps were exactly the same as the little box she had in her pocket.

“Well, I must be on my way. Thank you, Mr Pell, and good luck with your researches.” She gave him her brightest smile, and wandered away, doing her best to look casual, when in fact she was eager to get down to her own laboratory. Drifting along the benches, smiling and nodding politely, she reached the middle of the lab and found the tables empty. The Air Brigade scientists were working near the main door, and the lighting was focusing on them.

So she was able to neatly vanish through the cupboard into her own private realm without occasioning any comments. Thanks to another door, she could exit to the outside, and only have a short walk through the gardens back to the house.

Lyle had used that way out last night. They both knew they had to return to the house, but decided that doing so separately would be more discreet. Spending all night together would have been scandalous in the extreme.

Thoughts of Lyle hurried her movements. She had to verify that what she had taken from the antenna array was, in fact, the miniaturized version of Professor Royston’s transmitter.

Because if that proved to be the case, then a *lot* of very interesting doors had just opened up…

Chapter Ten

"That should do it." Lyle swung himself back into the cabin after tightening some connections that had rattled on their journey down to Treadwell Vale. "She'll be a bit quieter on the way home."

"Excellent, sir." Lieutenant Commander Farrell raised an eyebrow at him. "So glad you're repaired something nobody else thought was broken."

"Hah." Lyle snorted. "You've got to learn to trust your leader, Gervais. Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"Well, there was that one time…"

"Yes, yes, all right. That'll do. Don't throw my past sins in my face, please." He grinned.

Gervais Farrell grinned back. "I hear you'll soon be taking a wife. I should probably let her know of some of those sins so that she can do the throwing if I'm not around…"

"Very funny," growled Lyle. "But true, yes. Lady Barbara has accepted my proposal."

"A perfect match if you'll forgive my saying so. That young woman was born to fly. The delight in her face when we took off? Made us all feel as if we were giving her a special gift."

"We were. She's wanted to fly since she was a toddler, I understand. And you're right. Too many people can't stomach the idea of being in the air, but then there's the rest of us…" He laughed. "And now Barbara."

"And speaking of the devil…" Farrell pointed down. "I believe that's her down there."

"Good Lord." Lyle blinked through the glass to where his new fiancée was waving frantically at him. "I'd better go and see what she wants…" He moved to the ladder.

"And so it begins…" intoned Farrell solemnly. "Thus are the best of us brought to our knees."

"Idiot," grunted Lyle as he ran down the steps to the ground.

"Lyle, I'm sorry to disturb you," Barbara hurried to his side. "But I've found out something and I think it may be important."

"What is it?" He blinked at her, noting her concern.

She glanced upward. "Not here. Walk with me a little."

Puzzled now, and slightly worried, he took her arm and led her away from the ship. "Barbara, what's wrong?"

She inhaled a deep breath. "I'm not sure," she answered, her voice low. "I went to the laboratory this morning, to see if your technicians

were getting on well enough with what we had to offer in the way of facilities." She leaned against him a little. "I'm happy to say they were most complimentary."

"As well they should be." Lyle nodded.

"They were friendly, and we conversed about their work and so on. Very interesting discussions, by the way."

"Yes." He looked at her. "And?"

"And I met a gentleman by the name of Mr Pell. He was working on a strangely unmarked piece of bombing debris. We chatted a bit about this and that, and in passing he told me it was a part from an airship's communications system. The transmitter receiver unit."

"I know it," observed Lyle. "Very important things."

"Did you know that Professor Royston has created a much smaller version?"

Lyle stopped for a moment, frowned, and then continued walking. "No. No I didn't."

"Well, as it turned out, that little box we discovered in the array? It's identical to what the unit would look like if reduce in size." She pulled it from her pocket. "Here. You'll see the same array of inputs and outputs, only on a much smaller base."

"God." Lyle had stopped dead and held the box, turning it this way and that. "You're right." He looked up at her. "So you're saying this is one of Professor Royston's most recent inventions?"

"What else can it be?"

"What the hell is it doing in a pit in the ruins of Bristlewood Abbey?"

"Receiving and transmitting, I would imagine. At least it was until we removed it."

"How did it get there, I wonder?" Lyle pursed his lips.

Barbara sighed. "It was clearly built into the antenna housing." She stared at him. "Make no mistake, Lyle, the machine we found was not put there accidentally, nor was it someone's homemade experiment. The more I look at it, and the more information we gather, I'm convinced this is a very real device. After finding out exactly what that little box does? I'm prepared to say that the antenna is monitoring every single airship communication and transmitting that information to someone somewhere else."

"Jesus." He ran his hand through his hair. "And you don't think it's authorised?"

"Consider the situation, Lyle. Would it be buried by an old ruin if it was? Even if it was terribly secret, wouldn't *you* know?"

"Perhaps. I'm not sure." His mind spun.

"Sit." They had reached a stile, and she pulled him down beside her. "There's something else."

He turned worried eyes toward her. “Am I going to like it?”

“I don’t think so.” She shook her head. “But I have to preface this by saying it’s purely conjecture on my part.”

“So unproven then.”

“Correct.” Once again she leaned against him, for comfort perhaps. “Mr Pell was trying to solve the mystery of the explosives. He had a piece of metal that had clearly suffered the effects of one of the bombings, and yet—as you said—there were no traces at all of debris, scarring, any of the signs of damage from the explosives that usually occur.”

“Yes. It’s a big issue, and why we’re here.”

“I have a theory.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” She reached for his hand as she stared directly at him. “I believe the explosive being used in these bombings is *thonirium*.”

~*~

Given that she had just given him the verbal equivalent of a blow to the solar-plexus, Barbara thought he was taking it rather well.

Granted, he’d paled, but he was still sitting upright. A point definitely in his favour.

“Let me get my thoughts clear on all this,” he muttered. “Royston is making tiny comm units. Which, by the way, we haven’t heard about, so I’m not sure where that information came from, but since we apparently have part of one, I have to accept as true.”

“Yes.”

“It is possibly the thing you found in that strange antenna array at the ruins. The one that is aimed in the direction of Rumble Hill and may be listening in to everything that goes out over our comm system. Not to mention sending that information on elsewhere to person or persons unknown.”

“That’s correct.”

“And on top of that, you believe that the bombings may involve the use of thonirium, the most dangerous explosive on the planet, although you’re not absolutely sure about that.”

“In essence, yes.”

“Why?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?” she agreed.

“No, I mean why do you think thonirium is involved?”

It was Barbara’s turn to remain silent for a moment as she marshalled her thoughts. How to explain the chemical properties of

thonirium…

"All right. Let me see if I can describe it. Most explosives are exactly that. Explosive. They are compounds which can be detonated in a variety of ways, but they cause an effect in order to be destructive. Dynamite is lit by a fuse and when it explodes it takes all kinds of things with it, like dirt, glass, rocks…all things that leave a known pattern."

"I understand that."

"Well, when thonirium is detonated, it releases a burst of pure energy, which is almost unbelievably powerful. This energy enters and shatters everything in its path, but doesn't stir up the dirt, pick up glass or do anything but destroy. There is practically no pattern at all left behind because it's making the things it hits explode from within. There might be just a few spots here and there, but they would have to be located by the most powerful of energy detectors. And even then, they might not be recognisable."

Lyle stared at her. "How can you know all this?"

"I read. A lot. And as you know, I have some thonirium, so I have made myself an expert on that topic, as best I can." She touched his arm. "I believe that thonirium will be the answer to our future power needs, Lyle. I really do. You've seen what a single grain can achieve in my laboratory. Just imagine what an ounce could do…"

Silence fell for a long moment as Lyle, his face expressionless, simply sat next to Barbara. She let him think, knew he was turning everything she'd said over in his mind. It was odd how quickly she'd learned to read his face, but that was life, she supposed. And that was love, too.

He turned to her and took her hand in his. "I want to go back to the ruins. I need to see exactly where that box came from. Now that we know what it is, perhaps we can trace the connections and discover something about who built it and where it was sending information *to*."

"Yes, that is an excellent idea. The more we can find out about it, the better."

"Commander," a voice hailed them across the field.

"Damn," Lyle swore softly as a figure waved. "I'm being summoned."

"After dinner, Lyle." Barbara released his hand. "Go now and do whatever is needed. We'll find an excuse to escape. Your SecCom is coming with you tonight, yes?"

Lyle nodded, already rising. "Yes, Gervais and I both."

"Good. Afterward we'll do a little exploring." She stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips briefly against his. "I'll see you later."

Lyle smiled. "I like it when you do that."

“Me too.”

~*~

Despite the worries, uncertainties and somewhat frightening possibilities that her afternoon’s investigations had raised, Barbara thoroughly enjoyed dinner that evening.

Having Imelda there to complete the trio of friends was wonderful, since she was a constant source of humour and dry wit. Along with Aurelia, the three women more than held their own against Rowland, Lyle, and Lieutenant Commander Gervais Farrell.

Barbara caught him with his gaze fixed on Imelda more than once, and had to admit they were well matched, both physically and intellectually.

Apparently Gervais loathed all the books Imelda classified as being on her top ten list of recommendations, and a lively discussion degenerated into a very funny argument as each did their best to defeat the other’s protestations.

Barbara’s sides were aching as she rose from the table at the end of the meal. “If you’re all in agreement, we’ll skip the after-dinner tea and brandy, although Killigrew has it ready in the drawing room, just in case.” She turned to her fiancé. “Lyle and I are going to take advantage of the country informality and enjoy a walk together.” She grinned. “We’re engaged, so that is quite acceptable.”

“You’ll leave us, just like that? Well. There’s five years of friendship for you.” Imelda chuckled. “Disgraceful, I call it.” She waved her hands. “Go along then. Leave your guests. Be uncharitable. I shall use this time to try to decide whether to forgive you or not.” She turned to Gervais. “And unless you cry craven and run back to your airship, I intend to escort you to the library, find that sonnet by Shakespeare, and prove once and for all that your literary knowledge, sir, needs *vast* improvement.”

“Hah,” answered the target of her words, rising from his seat. “Challenge accepted, Lady Imelda. Prepare to grovel at my feet upon your loss.”

Aurelia sighed. “I think it’s time to check on Pip, don’t you?” She looked at Rowland. “I can’t take much more of this outrageous behaviour by these terrible women.”

Rowland tilted his head back and roared with laughter. “Pip it is, and bedamned to these scandalous wenches.”

Thus adjured, the party broke up with great good humour, just as Barbara had intended.

She excused herself from Lyle, telling him she'd meet him outside in a few moments, and scurried up to her room to exchange her silk corset for a leather one.

Since the latter laced up the front, she had no difficulties putting it on, and once settled, she felt much safer. It was another garment of her own design and included several features not usually seen on a piece of ladies' clothing. The most prominent was the elegant pistol, barely visible in a pouch tied to the side. A long slender knife was completely concealed in a thick seam on the other side.

There were lucifers, her tool assortment, a couple of tiny candles, and—her favourite—a miniature grenade composed mostly of magnesium. She'd laboured long and hard over that little toy, and it worked flawlessly. She prayed she'd not need it tonight, but felt better with it at hand.

Lyle was waiting by a summer rose, and he gallantly picked one, presenting it to her as she walked up to him. "There are many flowers in one's life but only one rose."

"Oooh, how lovely." She took the bloom, inhaling its rich fragrance. "Who said that?"

"Not a clue," he answered with a grin, taking her arm. "Now. Where are we headed?"

"Back to the ruins. I have a few more tools with me and it's time to really explore that machine." They headed out of the Treadwell gardens. "Have you thought any more about the whole monitoring business in connection with Rumble Hill?"

"I've tried," he replied. "I do know that Rumble Hill broadcasts a lot of information that could be useful to outsiders, such as battalion movements within England, when one is called to action, for example. That would be a clue to anyone overhearing it that we might be sending more troops to the war in the East."

"Not something you'd want non-military ears to hear."

"Absolutely not."

"Is there a record of these transmissions, Lyle?"

He grinned at her. "You're not the only one with good ideas, darling. Yes, there is. I've already requested transcripts for the days before and after the bombings. If information in those documents matches the scenes…well, we've discovered a huge clue."

"Excellent." Satisfied, she looked ahead and slowed her pace. "There are the ruins."

Lyle gripped her hand and pulled her to a halt. "Hush."

Barbara froze, her gaze following his.

And sure enough, there were brief glimpses of a small light, right at the spot where they knew the antenna was located.

"Someone's there," she whispered low.

“This way.” Lyle pulled her to one side, leading her away from their usual path to the gap in the hedge. Silently, the two of them crept along the bushes, looking for another way through.

“Here,” she breathed, slowing and pointing.

Lyle nodded. “Careful. Sharp thorns…”

Making barely any sound, they wormed their way between the shrubbery, doing their best not to catch their clothing, and finally emerging on the other side. They were now well behind whoever had opened the antenna, and they could use the ruins to conceal themselves.

Lyle held a finger to his lips and motioned in one direction, pointing to himself.

Barbara nodded, understanding that he would go first. She worried that his uniform might catch the light, but his white shirt would have been even more visible, so she crossed her fingers and watched him slink the first few yards to a large pile of rubble. Then he beckoned, and she followed in his footsteps.

Once again, they repeated the process until they were close enough to hear the clink of tools and the muttering of a voice over the hole in the turf.

Barbara knelt down on the grass behind the last stone, and Lyle came up behind her, leaning forward over her. The two of them peered cautiously around the edge of the stone to see what was happening.

And both of them sucked in a simultaneous breath as they saw Professor Royston frowning over the machine.

Barbara froze, as did Lyle, and they watched as he muttered and tinkered, his tools knocking against metal, his tiny lamp flickering weakly.

She guessed he must have been there for about half an hour before they’d arrived, since she had one of those lamps herself and knew how long they lasted.

The Professor was growing ever angrier; that much was clear. He no longer tinkered, he smashed. Wires were torn up, and his final act was to take a hammer to what was left. Then he removed something from the bag beside him and stood with a muttered curse.

Turning to leave, he threw whatever it was into the pit and rushed away.

Barbara jumped up from her knees and pushed Lyle down behind the stone, falling on top of him.

“Wha…”

Before Lyle could protest, a vivid flash lit the entire place for barely a second. And then, other than some disgruntled fluttering from a few birds, the night was quiet.

“What the hell was that?” Lyle whispered.

“A light grenade,” Barbara breathed. “I recognised it when he took it out of his bag. I have one.”

“Of course you do,” said Lyle, dryly. He moved his head a little. “I think he’s gone.”

“Does this mean I have to get off you now?” Barbara wriggled, rather enjoying the position now that the danger of discovery had passed.

“Yes,” huffed Lyle. “I’m lying on what feels like eight large boulders.”

“Oh, sorry,” she struggled to her feet.

Brushing themselves off, they stood, and then looked at each other for long moments.

“So what does all this mean, d’you think?” Barbara raised her eyebrows at him.

“I wish I knew.” Lyle sighed heavily. “It certainly proves that Royston is involved with whatever that antenna did. If we assume it was eavesdropping, for want of a better word, on Air Brigade communications, then that right there is a serious business. And if he had arranged for it to send the information on? Could be treason.”

Barbara nodded. “We should go back, Lyle. Back to Treadwell Vale. Rowland will be wondering where we are. And I doubt there’s much left of the workings of the antenna.” She tucked her arm through his and they began to make their way carefully through the darkness. “I have to wonder why he’s doing this,” she thought aloud. “Is someone paying him? A foreign entity eager for Air Brigade plans?”

“A possibility, for sure,” answered Lyle. “But I’ve never felt that Royston is in need of money. He doesn’t seem the sort to put much value on it. He’s very involved with all things scientific, not monetary.”

“Family?”

“I don’t know.” Lyle paused. “But it’s something we should check into.”

They walked on in silence for a while, Barbara’s thoughts turning over the questions, searching for answers, analysing the things they knew and cataloguing the things they didn’t. “I’m having a hard time recalling the Professor,” she mused.

“He did say he knew your Papa,”

“Yes, that’s true.” She looked up at him. “I was quite young, maybe six or seven, I think. He came to visit Papa and they went to the laboratory.” She sighed. “That’s all I remember. But at least I know why he’s vaguely familiar.”

“I wish I had the opportunity to *really* talk with Royston.” Lyle

sounded thoughtful. “I don’t know many of the technicians very well, but most of us have chatted now and again. Not Royston, though.”

Barbara agreed. “I’d like to chat with him too.”

“A lot of questions, and few answers at the moment.”

“And the threat of more bombings hanging over everything.” She tugged him to a halt. “We have to do something. Or perhaps say something to somebody about what we’ve seen. It might help…”

“It might,” he turned to her. “But if Royston is involved in any way at all, that opens up the possibility that others within Air Brigade itself might be part of the scheme. I hate to think so, but I’m not sure if I can afford to take that chance. And it might scare Royston himself if he got wind of our inquiries. If he flees the country…”

She understood his plight. His face betrayed his worries, and she ached for him. Reaching up, she put her arms around his neck and drew him down to her. “I think you should kiss me right now, rather than looking for more trouble.”

The tension in his shoulders eased. “I think you’re right.”

Once again, Barbara felt the magic of his mouth on hers, long moments when the world vanished and there was just the two of them in their own little universe.

He was warm, his hands gentle and loving, and she shared his breaths, moaning a little at the wondrous shivers running through her. Finally, she pulled away. “There. That’s much better than trying to solve a problem with little to no information.”

“I like your way of thinking, Barbara,” he chuckled.

“I like your way of kissing, Lyle,” she laughed back.

He slid his arm around her as they walked and hugged her. “That’s a very good thing, since you’ll be experiencing it for many years to come.”

“I still can’t quite believe we’re going to marry,” she admitted. “It doesn’t seem real yet.”

“We’ve only been engaged a day, if that. So yes, I’m not sure it’s real yet, either.”

“Oh.” Barbara stopped dead in her tracks. “Lyle. I’ve had the very *best* idea.”

“And that would be?”

“We’ll have an engagement party. Right here. At Treadwell Vale.”

“Er…”

“Wait, don’t you see? We’ll have all your crew, and all the technicians as well. Rowland will issue the invitations, Imelda, and Aurelia are here…”

His eyebrows rose as he understood. “And Professor Royston will *have* to attend.” Lyle shook his head. “Devious, my darling. Very devious, but also very clever. I’m going to have a brilliant wife, aren’t

I?"

She grinned. "Yes, dear. You are indeed." She sobered. "But whether you'll be able to manage a conversation with him long enough to find out anything, I don't know. That'll be up to you. Or maybe us. Either way, I think it would be our best chance to get him talking in a social fashion. Otherwise, this visit will be over and he'll be gone."

"Very well," Lyle conceded. "It'll be difficult for me to take a lot of time away from my duties, though. May I leave the arrangements in your hands?"

"You're scheduled to depart on Saturday, I believe? Can you put it off for a day? Because Saturday night would be perfect for the party, and if you leave early Sunday morning it'll only be a few hours difference…"

"I think I can make that change, yes."

Barbara gave a contented sigh. "Then that will be the date. I'll take care of the details, and you can expect a formal invitation from Rowland for everyone tomorrow morning."

"You will update me on the arrangements tonight, I hope," murmured Lyle, "Our rooms aren't too far apart?"

She shot him a wicked little smile. "Right across the hall from each other."

"You think of everything, my sweet."

"I try."

Chapter Eleven

"Are you jesting?" Aurelia blinked at Barbara over the breakfast table.

"Seriously?" Imelda did almost the same thing.

"I wouldn't dream of making a joke about something as important as my engagement. What do you take me for?" Indignant, Barbara straightened. "This is a chance for Lyle and me to celebrate with friends and shipmates, so to speak. You're both my friends, and he'll bring his shipmates. And his scientists for good measure."

"But…" Aurelia looked panicked. "I have nothing to wear."

"I didn't bring a ballgown either," frowned Imelda. "I suppose we could send to London for one…"

"You won't need formal *ballgowns*, my dears. This is going to be an informal dance and celebration. Let's not call it a ball. Anyway, I have already arranged for the carriage to be brought around in an hour or so. You will both give me notes for your families, instructing them to pack whatever dress you decide upon, and any other things you may need. By tonight your clothes will be here."

Imelda shook her head. "You know, you'd have made an excellent War Marshall."

"Thank you." Barbara grinned.

"I don't—" Aurelia hesitated, "I don't have anything too fancy. Or new. It's going to have to be the gown I wore to the Dubois recital."

"Which is truly lovely and looks very appealing on you," said Imelda immediately.

"She's right," endorsed Barbara. "Besides, this is the country. It's highly unlikely that any of the guests have seen you in it before."

"Oh, I just realised. How can you hold a party like this with only three women?" Imelda frowned at her.

"Good question. But never fear. We have several friends in the area with young ladies in the household. Many of whom are either about to make their debut, or waiting for older sisters to do so. Where better to try their wings than at a small local affair, along with a group of up-and-coming Air Brigade lads?"

"And there won't be a large crush, will there?" Aurelia tilted her head to one side. "I believe Rowland said something about there being less than twenty on board the *Morrigan."*

"I'm planning on fifty guests, give or take." Barbara consulted the notes lying next to her cup and saucer. "Rowland knows a group of musicians in the area, so there'll be some dancing. We have the

ballroom, of course, and I'm thinking about serving plenty of nibbles during the evening. Killigrew lives for this sort of thing, and everyone seems terribly excited." She wrinkled her nose. "I must remember to do this more often. I think the Treadwell staff is getting bored."

Imelda rolled her eyes. "You sound like Mama. She always worries the household doesn't have enough to do."

Aurelia and Barbara, who had visited the ducal seat, grinned at each other, knowing that simply cleaning that massive edifice was probably a year's work, and then they'd have to go back and start it all over again.

"Be that as it may," Barbara continued, "I think the evening will be fun. And that is our main goal, to ensure everyone has a good time."

"Have you publicly announced your engagement?" Aurelia asked.

"We are about to do so. Rowland has written up the formal notice, and it's on its way to London as we speak."

"That'll put the cat amongst the pigeons," Imelda observed over her teacup. "Especially since you aren't there. Nobody will be able to claim the honour of the month by having the two of you attend their ball."

"It might start a run on AirFleet gentlemen," giggled Aurelia. "After all, if the illustrious Lady Barbara Treadwell is happy to wed one, then goodness. It'll be open season on anyone above the rank of Corporal."

"I'd better warn my crew then." Lyle strolled in and made for the sideboard, helping himself liberally to breakfast. He glanced at the table. "Good morning, ladies."

Barbara grinned at him, seeing the flash of heat in his gaze as their eyes met. It had been less than two hours since they'd kissed and parted, but thankfully nobody was aware of that.

Rowland entered a moment later, also gathering food. "Lord, I'm hungry. Took me an hour to write that damn notice, Barbara. I worked up quite an appetite."

His sister sighed. "I gave you a perfectly good announcement. Why didn't you use that?"

"It sounded girly," he replied, seating himself at the table.

"Oh good grief." She shook her head. "Dare I ask to see the final one?"

"Too late. It's on the way," Rowland took a bite of toast and chewed with pleasure. "Just the routine stuff. Lord Rowland Withersham is pleased to announce the engagement of blah-blah-blah. You know the sort of thing."

Barbara heaved a dramatic sigh. "I suppose that will have to suffice."

"Well, you don't have a date set for the wedding yet, so yes, it had

better suffice." He eyed the small pot near him. "Is that jam or marmalade?"

"Jam. Blackberry jam." Aurelia pushed it nearer to his plate.

"Good. I'm not terribly fond of orange marmalade."

Lyle was grinning as he sipped his tea. "I suppose we should decide on a date, soon?" He looked at his fiancée.

She waved a hand airily. "There's no hurry. Let's get the engagement party stuff organised first."

So, with the help of her two friends, Barbara was able to lay out a schedule of most of the upcoming tasks before noon. Rowland had, of course, pleaded a press of work, and Lyle saluted everyone with a cheerful goodbye as he headed off to the *Morrigan*. He carried with him the formal invitation from the Earl to his shipmates.

Barbara crossed her fingers. There was really only one person who simply *had* to come, and that was Professor Royston.

When Lyle told her later in the day that the Professor had seemed pleased to have been invited and planned on attending, she frowned.

"Why?" She posed the question more to herself than to Lyle.

"I don't know," he answered. "I'm just relating what I observed."

"Well, I think it's odd. He's supposed to be reclusive and anti-social, and yet he's planning on attending a small country affair? Hmph."

"Don't worry, darling. I'll make sure I have that chat with him."

She thought for a moment or two. "Maybe he likes brandy. Remind me to set out a couple of bottles. If all else fails, perhaps we can get him drunk?"

Apparently, that suggestion amused Lyle so much he had to whisk her into the hall closet and kiss the daylights out of her.

~*~

The time left before the event passed far too quickly for Barbara's liking. The days were spent busily planning the party, and the nights were spent in Lyle's arms.

Each moment they loved, she found herself more convinced that she'd made the correct decision. Their bodies were becoming attuned to one another; they learned each other's pleasures and desires and yet knew they had barely scratched the surface of their passions.

Such magnificent sensations, such contented hours—Barbara could never have imagined how idyllic it was to love the right man. Waking up next to him, feeling the stubble of his beard against her flesh, each fresh experience was one of discovery and delight.

Instead of being exhausted, she found these nights of lovemaking to be exhilarating, and she awoke the following morning energised and eager to start the day.

Thus, on Saturday, she was up and about quite early, shocking the downstairs maid as she popped her head into the drawing room.

"Good mornin', m'Lady," curtseyed the girl, holding her broom upright. "Was you wantin' summat?"

"No, thanks. I'm just looking for my notes about this evening. I wondered if I might have left them in here."

"I don't think so, Ma'am. I put t' papers out a few minutes ago. There weren't nuthin' on the table."

"That's all right then. They must still be in my room. I'll find them." She smiled at the maid, who scurried away with another brief curtsey.

The newspapers caught her eye. Yesterday's news, of course, but at least they were kept almost up to date on what was going on. This time the headlines featured the story of an Air Brigade victory just outside of Pulwaar. It seemed that the enemy had underestimated the power of the warships, especially when accompanied by the crack military ground forces.

The city had fallen, the rebels were routed, and the casualties few.

It was good news, of course, but Barbara found herself wishing that the war would end. Too many lads were not coming home.

She sighed and turned, just as Lyle walked in.

"Good morning, love." He gave her a peck on the cheek.

She leaned into him, enjoying his familiar scent. "We took Pulwaar." She gestured at the papers.

He nodded. "I had a feeling we would. But that battle has been going on far too long. We should have taken it much sooner than this."

She thought about that. "Why didn't we?"

"The rebels were clever. Very clever. They had prepared counter attacks for our every manoeuvre. Nobody underestimates them these days. We've learned our lessons well."

"Hmm. I'm glad that one has ended, anyway." She pulled free. "I must go. Is everything all right for tonight?"

He cupped her cheeks. "It will be fine. Don't worry. I know we'll have the most splendid engagement party ever."

She laughed, covered his hands with hers, and kissed him. "It had better be. I have the most splendid fiancé ever, and I want everyone to know it."

"I do like the way you think," he chuckled. "Very much the obedient wife."

He was quick enough to duck the pillow Barbara grabbed and

threw at him as he hurried from the room.

However, their discussion lingered in the back of her mind as she dressed for the party that evening. How would rebels have the military knowhow to prepare effective counterattacks against the Air Brigade and the other forces?

It seemed an unlikely scenario. If she'd been in London, she probably would have spent the day researching some of the battles, to see if there was a pattern to this behaviour. And, she admitted to herself, could it be linked in any way to that dratted antenna and the interception of AirFleet communications?

"Come along, my Lady. This is no time for daydreaming." Jennie came up to her with several white roses, their stems bound with matching ribbons. "These are for your hair."

Barbara nodded. "Yes, I'm sorry. I was miles away, wasn't I?"

"Can't blame you." Jennie picked up hairpins and started arranging Barbara's hair. "After all, you have ever such a handsome gentleman now, and soon you'll be married to him. Most girls would daydream all the time about that, I reckon."

"Yes, I am lucky. And I know it." She stared at herself, the froth of white lace edging the neckline of her spring green silk gown. It was pretty, not too formal, and she knew it brought out the highlights in her hair.

"Just my pearls this evening, Jennie."

"Very good, m'Lady."

When Jennie was finished, Barbara stepped in front of the Piers glass. She saw a woman with roses in her hair and a delicate strand of pearls around her neck, her eyes glowing with happiness. For a second or two she stared, unsure if that was her. But then she simply nodded and accepted the image.

She'd found something wonderful, someone wonderful. And that had made all the difference.

"Right then. I must go downstairs, since our guests will be here soon, and I promised Lyle I wouldn't be late." She walked to Jennie and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you for making me look so lovely, as you always do."

"My pleasure, m'Lady. Not that I do very much at all." She blushed at the compliment.

"There will be plenty of food and drink for you to enjoy downstairs with the rest of the staff tonight." Barbara picked up her gloves. "You do not need to wait up for me, Jennie."

The two women exchanged looks. This would make yet another night that Barbara had issued the same command.

Jennie just smiled and nodded. "Yes, m'Lady." And if her smile was a little more knowing these days, well, Barbara wasn't about to

argue the point. She knew who would be unlacing her gown tonight, and she was perfectly happy with that.

Aurelia and Imelda were waiting at the bottom of the stairs, both looking excited.

All three women grinned at each other, praised each other's finery, and generally acted just like young ladies at the beginning of a party.

The giggles subsided as Rowland and Lyle appeared, followed by Gervais Farrell.

"I say. You all look as fine as fivepence. It's an honour to be here." The Lieutenant Commander bowed low.

"Lyle, you told him to say that, didn't you?" Barbara grinned at her fiancé.

"Took me at least an hour to get him to memorise it," he quipped back.

Rowland looked at the door. "I believe Killigrew is about to receive our first guests." He paused at the sound of a shrill titter, and paled. "Oh Barbara, you *didn't*. Mrs Fenchurch and her brood?"

"Sorry, but yes, I had to. We needed more females."

"Lyle, your crew can't get here quickly enough. I pray they're on their way." Rowland's desperate tones made them all grin. "Aurelia. Give me your arm. Protect me from what is about to descend on us…"

Lyle, biting back a chuckle, took Barbara's hand. "Gervais, take Lady Imelda in. I'll alert the troops. It appears we may all be under attack very shortly."

~*~

"I think it's going very well, don't you?" Aurelia took a moment to stand next to Barbara and catch her breath after the latest dance.

"Yes, I do." She nodded. "I have to commend Lyle's crew. They are dancing every dance with a different young lady. Mrs Fenchurch is beside herself with joy."

Imelda chuckled as she joined her friends. "I agree. And several of the scientists are just divine. I danced with at least two of them."

"You picked their brains, didn't you?" Aurelia shot a pointed look at Imelda. "Getting plot points for your book."

Imelda's chin went up. "And what if I did? I promised them a credit at the end."

Barbara laughed. "You're impossible. Both of you." Her gaze wandered over the ballroom, and she noticed Mr Pell standing alone. "You'll have to excuse me. I think I need to be a good hostess for a few minutes."

She calmly walked around the dance floor to the older gentleman's side. "Mr Pell, you're not dancing." She smiled at him.

He grinned back. "At my age, walking across the fields to get here was more than enough exercise, my Lady. But it is good to watch the fun."

"I agree. It is lovely to see, isn't it? But come and sit and be comfortable while you do. I need a few minutes off my feet, so I'll join you if I may."

Surprised but willing, Mr Pell followed her to where a few empty chairs lined the wall.

"Ah, that's good," he sighed as he eased himself down. "Twenty years ago, I'd have been showing those lads how to dance, I'll tell you. But age creeps up on one."

Barbara chuckled and replied, enjoying Pell's down-to-earth attitude. Naturally, the conversation turned to the scientists' work at Treadwell Vale.

"I had hoped we would have better results, my Lady, I'll be honest. I'm not sure we'll ever discover what we need to know about these bombs. Even Royston, almighty scientist that he is, declared himself at a loss."

Barbara thought for a moment. "Is he *that* good, Mr Pell?"

"He was," he nodded. "One of the top minds in his field. Until…" his voice trailed off.

"Until?" prompted Barbara.

"The tragedy." Pell sighed. "I suppose you'd not have heard, not being in the scientific world, of course. But it was very sad. Very sad indeed."

"Can you tell me what happened? I'm interested in everyone who has worked here, and the Professor also knew my Papa."

"Why, it was about eighteen months ago now, I think. His son had come up to London. Brilliant lad, he was too. Artist, you know. Sculptor. So he was in town to see one of his pieces at the Chadwick gallery, and while he was here, he decided to visit an AirFleet show."

Barbara watched Pell's face. Something sad was coming, she could feel it.

"Turns out they were testing some new rockets that day. They'd all worked just fine, otherwise they'd never have fired them off, I can assure you. I wasn't part of that project, but I know the rules and precautions. It's always safety first with AirFleet."

"Of course."

"One misfired."

"How dreadful. You know, I think I recall hearing something about it at the time. There were casualties, if I remember correctly."

"Yes. Two people killed, and several others injured. Royston's son

was one of the fatalities."

Barbara gulped. "Oh no. How terrible, Mr Pell."

"It was in all the papers, of course, but since our work isn't widely publicised, Royston's name didn't make much of a stir. There was more fuss about the Air Brigade's safety protocols." He shook his head. "Royston was never the same after that. Became reclusive, I heard. Shut himself away. He carried on working on AirFleet projects, but still…"

Barbara sighed and touched Pell's arm. "Thank you for telling me, Mr Pell."

"Science has many wonders and surprises for us, my Lady. But sometimes it also has danger and death up its sleeve."

"I couldn't agree more."

"Now then. This is not a time for maudlin reminiscences. You've a fine young man out there waiting for you, and I'd be happy to see you dancing with him."

"You're right." She put on her brightest smile. "And you'll promise to enjoy some of the food, won't you?"

He patted his stomach. "Already have."

She stood, laughing. "Excellent. We'll talk again, Mr Pell."

"My Lady." He dipped his head.

Her thoughts awhirl, Barbara set off to find Lyle. With what she'd been told, a new page had turned on the matter of Professor Royston. If he was involved with the bombings, then she had what might prove to be a very convincing motive.

She looked for Lyle, scanning the whirling couples. There were a lot of uniforms too, but only one Lyle. She saw him at last, on the other side of the room, chatting to a couple of officers.

"My Lady." A voice hailed her. "A lovely evening."

She turned to see Professor Royston at her side, and her heart thudded frantically for a moment or two. "Thank you, Professor. And may I say how happy I am to see you here. I have heard how devoted you are to your work, so I'm thrilled you took some time off to join us this evening."

"One must change one's line of thought now and again." He gazed across the heads of the dancers. "It freshens the brain, you know."

"I can see how it would, yes."

His hand drifted to a small pin in his lapel. "Just now I'm working on a very complex problem. So it is my hope that this happy event will stimulate my thinking." He glanced at her. "And I am remiss. I have not offered my congratulations, my Lady."

She smiled. "Thank you, Professor. I can honestly say I feel very lucky. I have always been interested in flight, and airships. Now I shall have a husband to answer all my questions most thoroughly."

He gave a brief nod. “Indeed.”

It was something in his eyes that sent a chill down Barbara’s spine. Cold, empty. His conversation was correct in every way, but it was as if he was responding without any emotion whatsoever.

She glanced at the little pin he was touching. It was a small sunburst, a central stone surrounded by tiny gold rays. But as the light caught it, she realised it wasn’t flat. The yellow gem was raised in a sort of bump.

He turned toward her, and for an instant she glimpsed the pin from a different angle. The bump looked like a button. It was most odd.

But he was bowing. “A pleasure speaking with you, my Lady. And my congratulations again on your engagement. The Commander will make a fine husband, I’m sure.”

She dipped her head in acknowledgement. “I am glad you were able to join us, Professor.”

“A lovely party. But now I must leave. There are some matters I wish to attend to before the night is over.”

And there it was again. That something, lurking in the back of his eyes.

Unsettled, Barbara managed a smile. “Then I’ll bid you good evening and thank you once more for coming.”

Walking away, her mind turned the conversation over several times, and her vision of that pin bothered her. There was something there…if only she could put her finger on what it was.

Her throat was dry, so she drifted to the dining room for a glass of something cool. There were few people here other than the servants, and the music was in full swing. She had a chance to sit, sip her water, and think.

Royston had suffered a terrible loss, and it had changed him, according to Pell.

He had an odd pin with what looked like a raised button of some sort…a button.

A sunburst with a button…

What could that be?

“*Oh dear God…”* The glass almost fell from her hand to the carpet, and she put it on the table. A terrible possibility had crossed her mind. *Lyle*. She had to find Lyle.

Rushing toward the ballroom, she sought him in the crowd and found him about to join the next dance.

“Lyle,” she called, loud enough to turn heads. “I need you.”

There was some laughter from the guests, but as soon as he saw her face, he hurriedly apologised to his partner and came to her as quickly as he could. “What is it?”

“The *Morrigan*.” She choked out the words as quietly as she could.

“I think Professor Royston may be planning to blow it up tonight. And I know how he’s going to do it. Come on…*we have to stop him*.”

Chapter Twelve

Lyle stared at Barbara for a few moments, wondering if they'd both gone mad.

But then he realised she was telling the truth. All the columns added up in his mind, all the numbers came together and he saw exactly what she meant.

"His son," he breathed.

"You knew?" She hurried him out of the ballroom.

"Yes, but it was going on two years ago or so at least, wasn't it? These things…they don't linger in one's mind."

"Well, I think they lingered in his. I think they festered there." She grabbed his hand. "He's always been an odd sort, but those eyes? Now they're empty. He has no emotions at all. He can *kill*, Lyle. I am as sure of that as I am of my own name. There's nothing to stop him."

"And if he's been monitoring our communications…"

"Yes, exactly." Barbara stopped for a moment at the front door. "Killigrew, the Commander and I have some urgent business at his airship. Would you let Rowland know? We should be back soon…"

"Very good, my Lady. I trust you'll be here for the fireworks?"

Lyle blinked. "Fireworks?"

"Indeed, Commander. The Treadwell tradition, you know. Any celebrations such as this are always concluded with a firework display as long as it isn't raining."

Barbara had been rummaging amongst the coats and emerged with a small bag hanging heavily from her wrist. "Right then. We must go. Thank you, Killigrew." She all but dragged him from the hall and out onto the steps. "Quickly. He has a head start."

They hurried. Lyle would have run, but as soon as they had crossed the Treadwell lawns, the grass turned to turf and the going was too rough.

As they slowed their pace, Barbara delved into the bag and produced a small lantern, which she flicked into life with one finger.

"What the…"

"A convenience. It won't last very long, but we can't afford to break a leg."

Lyle thought about that. "He'll see us coming."

"If he's heading for the *Morrigan*, we can douse the light before it becomes visible. Remember the hedges."

"And the moon," Lyle spared a glance upward. "If it would come out from behind those clouds, we wouldn't need a lamp."

They made their way across the field to the hedges and trees surrounding the airship. It was quiet enough that he could hear her breaths, and she could probably hear his.

Keeping his voice low now, he pulled her close. “Are you sure about this?”

She nodded emphatically. “Yes. It all fell into place. Did you speak with him at all?”

He shook his head. “No. I had hoped to catch him during the break in the music. Perhaps in the dining room.”

“Mr Pell told me about his loss. And then…” she paused. “We’re almost there.”

Lyle slowed his pace and silently guided her to the gap in the hedge.

Then he pulled her to a halt and leaned close. “Let me go on from here. I can stop him.”

She glared at him. “I know more about the explosive and the detonator than you do. It’s together or not at all.”

In that moment, meeting her gaze squarely, he saw the strength and courage that lurked behind her lovely face. He could not have found a better woman, even though he was going to have to put his natural protective instincts aside.

“Come on then, but for God’s sake be careful.”

“You too,” she muttered.

They silently made their way through the bushes, staying as low as they could. His uniform was a giveaway, since the shining gold buttons and epaulettes would light up like beacons if the moon shone too brightly. But Barbara was in green, blending much better with her surroundings. Except for the lace and the white skin, of course.

Random thoughts masked the frantic concern running continuously through his mind.

Emerging onto the field, they kept to the shadows along the edge. The ship herself was illuminated by several lamps on the ground near the ladders to the cabin, which deepened the surrounding shade.

A blessing for Lyle and Barbara.

And there he was. Professor Royston.

“What is he doing?” Barbara breathed.

“I can’t see,” he murmured. “It looks like he’s brought something out of the ship…”

They watched as Royston, illuminated by the lights, took things out of a large carpetbag and put them on the ground, muttering to himself as he did so.

“I can’t risk him finishing whatever it is he’s doing,” whispered Lyle. “I’m going to try to engage him in conversation.”

“Wait,” she tugged on his arm. “If I’m right, he has some

thonirium."

He bit back an oath. If that was true, Royston could take out not only the Morrigan, but possibly Treadwell Vale as well, depending on the quantity of the explosive. Was that his plan? Kill everything in the area?

"How much to blow up the *Morrigan*?"

"Not a lot." She sighed. "One of my grains would easily do it."

"So we can't find it…?"

"If it's on board, we wouldn't find it without the right detectors. It would take time." She gripped his arm. "But it has to be detonated. He has the detonator, and I'll wager it's that pin on his lapel. If he presses that…"

"All right." He squared his shoulders. "I'll talk to him."

"Lyle…"

"You know I'm right. It's why we're here. We have to stop him detonating the thonirium. If I can't," he hugged her. "I want you to run like you've never run before."

She nodded. "All right."

He couldn't help a brief grin. "You're lying."

She kissed him quickly. "Of course."

~*~

It took every ounce of courage she had to *not* follow Lyle out into the light. She wanted to be there, at the side of the man she had come to love so fiercely. And it had happened so quickly too. As if there was no doubt that they were destined for each other, and all it took was a couple of meetings to solidify what was inevitable.

He stood tall, strolling casually over the turf.

"Professor Royston. You're not at the party?"

The man jumped; clearly not expecting to find anyone there. "What are you doing here, Commander?" He squinted against the lights of the ships.

"I had something to attend to, and in truth I was a little bored with the dancing." Lyle shrugged casually. "What brings you out?" He looked deliberately at the pile of things by Royston's feet. "Doing some house cleaning?"

Royston's snarl was evident even to Barbara, standing a dozen yards away. The light illuminated his face quite clearly, and she saw the sparkle of the pin still on his lapel.

Maybe she'd been wrong…

"No, not housecleaning," Royston answered Lyle's question.

“Then what? You have a grafik there, in that frame. And a cravat, and…boots? Certainly appears to be house cleaning to me.”

There was silence for a few moments. Barbara couldn’t make out who was in the grafik, but she was prepared to wager it would be Royston’s son. Most parents liked to be able to see their children all the time; desks were littered with the framed grafiks in all shapes and sizes. They were quite normal.

“Are you going to be long?” Royston’s voice carried clearly, sharp and with an edge of anger.

Lyle’s answer was smooth and unhurried. “I don’t know. Perhaps I could stay and help you?”

“I’d rather be alone, thank you.”

“Ah, well then.” Lyle remained where he was.

Royston completed his chores and kicked the bag away. “You really should go, you know.”

“Should I? Can you tell me why?”

Royston’s hand drifted to his lapel, and Barbara’s heart stopped for a moment. Then she reached into her bag and pulled out the remaining cargo. The comforting feel of her pistol in her hand steadied her, but she still kept her gaze fixed on the two men not far away.

“Because…because…I need to be *alone*.”

Lyle paused for a second or two. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Professor.”

Royston’s head jerked up and he stared at Lyle. “You *know*, you bastard. You know, don’t you?” He stepped backward.

Lyle stayed where he was. “Know? What should I know?”

“That if you stay where you are, you will die very shortly.”

Casually, Lyle straightened his jacket and flicked something off one cuff. “That’s rather a threatening statement, Professor. But I have to inform you that I’ve no intention of dying any time soon. I have a lovely fiancée, and I’m planning on getting married, not dying here tonight.”

“Such bravado,” sneered Royston.

“Not really. I’m just trying to find out what’s going on, that’s all.”

Royston moved back another pace. “You want to know? You want to know what’s going on?”

“Of course I do. You’re outside my ship acting in a manner I can only describe as strange. Who wouldn’t be curious about what’s going on?”

“Your ship, is it? *Your* ship? Will you take responsibility for it? Do you always take responsibility, Commander, even when your ship has killed so many?”

Lyle was quiet for a moment. “In battle, one does what one must,

Professor." His voice was steady.

"How about if your ship kills just one?"

"I don't understand. Can you explain?"

Royston pointed to the framed grafik on the ground. "My son. These few things. All I have left of him."

"I heard of the tragedy. I am very sorry for your loss, Professor Royston. A terrible thing indeed."

Barbara could hear the sympathy in Lyle's voice, but it was lost on the Professor.

"A terrible thing? It was *all that and more*. And you and your ilk are completely responsible. *Completely and utterly responsible*."

"Accidents happen. You are a man of science. You know this."

"Nonsense. It was no accident. I should have been there that night. The rocket was meant for me. I know it as surely as I know I am standing here." His words were coming faster, his fury building. "My son was blown to pieces, Commander, by some idiot who pushed a button too soon. There wasn't enough left for me to bury, did you know that? Thank God his mother had gone before him."

"I…"

"Shut up. Just *shut up*."

Barbara shuddered. Royston was approaching some kind of panicked crisis, and she could clearly hear it in his voice.

"All right. What do you want me to do?" Lyle asked. "How can I help?"

"You *can't*." The answer spat back, loud and vicious. "You and your damned Air Fleet have done enough. Now it's *my* turn." He reached for his lapel and tore off the pin, holding it high above his shoulder. "Do you know what this is? Do you, Commander?"

"I think I do," answered Lyle.

"In that case, take a good look around you, and say goodbye to it all…because once I push this, there'll be nothing left of you, your precious airship, this field, or Treadwell Vale."

"Or you," said Lyle, softly. "And it won't bring your son back."

"Do you honestly think I *care*?" He lifted his arm higher, suddenly illuminated as the fireworks from Treadwell Vale began to light up the sky.

Knowing Lyle would never reach Royston in time to stop him from pressing the detonator, Barbara carefully sighted along the barrel of her pistol.

And fired.

~*~

“What happened then?” Aurelia’s eyes were wide as she asked the question that hovered on everyone’s lips.

“Your amazing friend, my incredible fiancée, shot Professor Royston *in the arm*. The one that was holding up the detonator. He dropped it, of course, and I was able to restrain him.” Lyle leaned back in his chair. “I think the bullet shattered a couple of bones.”

Imelda stared at Barbara. “A remarkable shot. You could have killed him and settled the matter.”

“No, I couldn’t,” she replied firmly. “I just couldn’t.”

“It was a good thing,” added Lyle. “There will be many questions waiting for him in London.”

“And now?” Rowland blinked at the two of them sitting next to each other at the breakfast table.

“I sent a message last night before we returned. Royston admitted to the bombings. He’d been systematically trying to destroy the Air Brigade’s airship force.” He sighed. “There will be a small unit of Ground Militia arriving momentarily and they will secure the Professor and take him back to London with them.”

“He’ll be shot as a traitor?” Rowland glanced at Lyle.

“There will be a trial, of course…” answered Lyle diplomatically. “But then he’ll probably just disappear. The public will have lost interest at that point. So,” he paused and looked around the table, “most probably yes. He’ll be executed.”

“Goodness,” said Imelda, staring at Barbara. “I doubt I could write such exciting and terrifying scenes. But it would make an excellent climax for a mystery.”

“Feel free to use it,” grinned Barbara. “Just be sure to change the names, the places and eliminate any and all mention of thonirium.”

“Well, I have to admit it, sister, I always thought it was a bit odd of you to take such an in-depth interest in sciences and machines and all that. But it certainly paid off last night.”

She nodded at Rowland. “Of course, it helped that you started the fireworks right on time. Nobody heard my shot, and thus the party went on as planned.”

Aurelia frowned. “You sound more worried about the party than anything else?”

“Not at all,” Barbara answered. “I can’t begin to tell you how I felt when I saw the Professor raise his hand and knew he was ready to detonate the thonirium. I did the only thing I could do to stop him. But once we’d taken care of that threat, keeping the news away from our guests was quite important.”

“I used to wonder about those shooting lessons you insisted on taking from Marchbanks.” Rowland grinned. “I think he was scared to

say no to you, and yet very proud of your accuracy."
She grinned and glanced around. "Our old gamekeeper. He always told me that you never know when things like that might come in handy. I'd say last night proved the validity of that statement."

Lyle touched her gently on the shoulder and let his hand lie there. "I cannot stress enough, to all of you, that what we've told you this morning is top secret. Thonirium is still experimental. It's unpredictable and hard to obtain. And it is, when all's said and done, a terrible weapon of destruction. So, please, not a word of it, or of last night's events, beyond this house."

Everyone nodded.

"Where is Royston now?" Rowland asked Lyle.

"In your barn, actually. The story—should anyone inquire—is that he was accidentally injured by someone out hunting for badgers."

"Do people shoot badgers?" Aurelia's frown was quite terrible.

"I have no clue, but since there aren't any wild boar and hunting deer at night seems a useless task, I chose badgers. They're night creatures, aren't they?" Lyle looked around the table.

"Yes, dear, they are," Barbara restrained a chuckle. "However, I think they're more commonly trapped, than shot."

He shrugged. "Oh well. Nevertheless, the story served its purpose. It's unlikely the guests will remember the accident. I'm sure the talk will be of the party and the fireworks."

"And the wonderful time everyone had celebrating our engagement." Barbara smiled at him. "Not to mention how attractive a couple we made."

"Good grief." Imelda rolled her eyes. "I think it's time I packed. All this sweetness is making my teeth ache." She grinned. "But thank you for some wonderful story ideas."

"Any time." Lyle waved a hand casually as everyone laughed.

The group scattered in different directions; Imelda and Aurelia to pack, Rowland to check on Pip, and Barbara and Lyle to walk outside to the terrace.

He put his arm around her and held her close, his eyes telling her silently how blessed they both were to be together.

She looked up at him, understanding. "Yes, Lyle. We did it. We discovered the bomber and stopped his plan for another explosion."

"I'd agree, except that it was pretty much all you. You knew about thonirium, detonators, and are a good enough shot to pierce a man's arm at God knows how many paces. At night."

She repressed the urge to agree. "It was us. We make a good team."

He nodded and turned his head toward the forest. "We'll have to stay a few more days. Nobody can go aboard the *Morrigan* until we've

located the thonirium."

"Your technicians already have my home-made detection unit. I don't know how well it will work in an airship, but it might narrow the location down. Then when the official version arrives, I'm sure they will find it in good time."

"Are you in a hurry for me to leave?" He glanced at her, a smile curving his lips.

"Not at all," she grinned back. "I am in a hurry to secure the thonirium, however. It's still a threat of sorts, even though the detector has been disarmed."

"I'm afraid it always will be," he answered. "That is one problem we'll have to deal with over the next months and years."

Barbara leaned against him. "Perhaps the war will end soon."

"I hope so. I truly hope so."

"Lyle, do you think Royston might have been providing the rebels with the information he was getting from his antenna? It would explain their ability to prolong battles…"

"I would have tentatively said yes a couple of days ago, but now, after seeing his face and hearing his words last night, I'd have to say no. The bombings were all about revenge for his son's death."

Barbara nodded. "I agree, but that does leave a very big open question, doesn't it?"

"It does," he replied. "I don't want to think someone is betraying us, but it's a nasty possibility."

She sighed. "There will always be those who wish to stir up trouble. Betray their country, sell information for gold. It's sad."

"Yes. But then there are all the good people who do nothing like that at all. We're them, I hope."

"We are. A couple of good people. Surrounded by other good people."

They stood thus, arms around each other, breathing in the sweet morning air. Barbara knew they had been very lucky. The fact that she'd made the shot and hit Royston's arm was close to a miracle, and something that might well haunt her nightmares for some time to come.

But for now, everything and everyone was safe.

"Do you want children?" she asked.

"*What*?" Lyle turned, shock on his face. "Well…I…yes, of course. If you do. Do you…I mean…where the hell did that question come from?"

She had to laugh at the confused response, so unlike his usual calm demeanour. "I'm not sure. I was just thinking about the future. About us being married. And the inevitable consequences." She leaned close to his ear. "In fact, one never knows if we've already started on one of

those consequences…"

He cleared his throat. "Do you know…isn't it too early to tell? Um…*have* we?"

"I have no idea," she smiled. "But I thought we should at least consider the possibilities."

"I've a better idea," he smiled back. "I think we should take ourselves upstairs to our rooms, find an excuse for you to come to mine, and then lock the door."

"Oh. I see." She loved that look, the one where his eyes turned warm and gentle. She usually saw it right before they made love. "What should we then?"

"Hmm, I do have some Fleet crew reports I need to read…"

"Ah, yes. That's most important, I suppose."

"You could help me, if you'd care to."

"I could?"

"Oh absolutely." His finger traced her neck, making her shiver with pleasure.

"How could I be of assistance?"

"Well, let me see." He dropped a quick kiss on her lips. "You could start by taking your clothes off, so that I could look at you naked instead of those boring reports. And then we might decide to spend some time working on perfecting our experimental techniques when it comes to creating offspring…"

Barbara grinned. "Hmm. Yes, I'd be happy to volunteer as a visual distraction, and you are well aware of how much I adore scientific experiments…"

Epilogue

It was a given that Lyle and Barbara would be married aboard the *Morrigan*. It did mean that an Air Brigade General had to be summoned to give his permission for the ceremony, conducted by Lyle's Command Chaplain. But once all the formalities had been satisfied, the wedding proceeded without hindrance, and the guests gathered in the field below were able to watch through the foreglass as the bride and groom tied the knot ten feet above them.

The party, as might be expected, was at Treadwell Vale, and the celebrations carried over into nearby villages, farms, and even three local churches where bells were rung as a tribute to the happy couple.

"I'm going to be exhausted from thanking people," muttered Rowland as he stood next to Aurelia at the wedding breakfast.

"Nonsense," she laughed. "You are Withersham, the Earl. All those things come automatically to you."

"D'you think so?" He turned a surprised gaze on her. "It doesn't feel that way."

"Well, I can assure you it looks that way." She leaned back, surveying him critically. "You have it perfectly, Rowland. You're every inch the Earl." She turned away and surveyed the guests as they trickled in. "And they all know it."

"I say, that's awfully nice of you." Rowland's cheeks flushed.

"It is, isn't it?"

"Uh…" He peered at her. "Everything all right, there, old girl?"

"Rowland, this is me. Please don't play the idiot toff, because I know you're not." She suppressed a twinge of irritation.

"Don't know what you're talking about." He lifted his chin and smiled and nodded at someone who passed them at that moment. "Hallooo. Yes, jolly lovely isn't it?"

"I'm talking about the person you become at times like this." She gripped his arm. "It's not who you are."

He flashed her a quick glance. "Are you sure?"

"*Yes*."

He rolled his eyes. "Aurelia, as you pointed out a minute ago, I *am* Withersham. People expect Withersham, so I become him. I am him. If I start appearing to be something else, then what?"

"So you play these games? Pretending to be a jolly but rather simple Earl?" She frowned. "I don't understand that, Rowland."

"Look," he covered her hand with his. "Come this way. Let's find a slightly quieter spot." Drawing her from the increasing crowd, he led

her to the terrace. Although there were tables set, nobody had yet discovered them, so they had the place to themselves.

"Right. Let me explain. I didn't expect to become Withersham for decades. You know that. You know when our parents died, both Barbara and I had some serious adjustments to make. Barbara more than me."

"Yes. I know all this. And you've both overcome those difficulties to reach this point. It's been quite amazing." She waved her hand around. "You're Withersham and Barbara is now Lady Barbara Treadwell-Meredith, Air Brigade wife."

"Right. Given all that, I never had chance to learn *how* to be an Earl." He pursed his lips. "I certainly didn't want to be my father's sort. So I decided I'd like to be one of the nicer ones. I have friends, people everyone likes. So I watched them. Inoffensive, never causing trouble or upsetting anyone. That seems to me to be the essence of someone in power. So if I have to appear as if I haven't a care in the world, so be it."

"You are a very good Earl, Rowland. I'm not arguing that point at all." Aurelia paused and gathered her thoughts. "It's just that you have a brilliant mind. And I don't think the 'Earl' role you slip into allows anyone to realise that."

He looked at her, his hazel eyes more gold than green in the sunlight. "Truthfully? I don't care."

"But…" She was at a loss to comment.

He grinned. "Let it go, my dear. I'm glad there's someone other than Barbara who will credit me with a bit of a brain, but don't worry that I'll let my role as the nice Earl lead to my being taken advantage of. In fact," he linked arms with her and started to stroll toward the end of the terrace, "I've managed to snabble more than a couple of people bent on doing just that. A man applying for a job as assistant stable manager. He made the mistake of underestimating me."

Aurelia couldn't help a laugh. "I take it he discovered his mistake?"

"I have no idea. I sent him to a fictitious address somewhere in the Shetland Islands. Haven't heard a thing since."

"Here you are." Imelda walked through the French doors, with Gervais Farrell right behind her. She turned to him. "You see? I said they'd be hiding somewhere quiet."

Gervais sighed. "Apologies, Lord Withersham. There's no dealing with this one." He tipped his head at Imelda.

"Hah," she snorted. "Pay no attention to him, Rowland. He's just miffed because I plan on using him as a character in my current mystery."

Aurelia couldn't help a laugh. "Didn't we warn you, somewhere

along the line, Lieutenant Commander?"

He sighed theatrically. "Yes, I believe you did. As did Lady Barbara as well."

"Some friends I have," groaned Imelda. "Speaking of which, where's the bride and groom?"

"Changing, I think," answered Rowland. "They're planning a grand exit. Whatever that means."

"Barbara is changing into a dress the colour of rose petals." Aurelia looked smug. "Did you know that when Lyle was a boy he flew in an airship over Barbara's house and she was on the roof watching?"

"I'll be damned. I remember she used to get into trouble for climbing out onto the roof tiles. Nanny had fits." Rowland smiled at the memory.

"Well, it's true. She had on a pink dress, and he saw her. Talk about destiny."

Imelda shook her head. "A strange coincidence, perhaps. But leave it to Barbara to see her husband from a rooftop as a child and not even know it until years later."

"She's certainly unique," added Gervais.

Aurelia held up her hand. "Hush. Can you hear that?"

The others fell silent as the faintest hum began, almost a whisper at first, but then increasing in volume.

"Oh ho," grinned Gervais. "I know that sound." He left Imelda's side and went to the door of the house. "Hullo everyone. Come outside…you don't want to miss this…"

The guests rapidly poured through the doors onto the terrace and looked up where Gervais was pointing.

Sure enough, it was the *Morrigan*.

"Good grief," Aurelia laughed aloud. "Leave it to Barbara. Flying away from their own party."

The airship drew nearer and nearer, until everyone could clearly see Lyle and Barbara waving through the glass at the assembled crowd below.

Then Lyle moved away from her side and did something to the glass. Barbara joined him and a moment later, her bouquet was winging its way toward the earth. The shouts of the women rushing to catch it almost drowned out the sound of the ship's engines, but a puff of wind caught the flowers and dashed them to the ground.

Right between Aurelia and Imelda.

They looked at each other.

"All right," said Imelda. "On three." She counted. "One…two… three…"

The two of them both made a grab for the bouquet, which promptly split in half. They groaned as Rowland and Gervais tried not

to laugh.

Aurelia sighed. “So what does *half* a wedding bouquet mean?”

Imelda shook her head and looked at her friend. “It’s a sad thing for a mystery writer to say, but *I haven’t a clue*.”

THE END

Barbara’s adventures will certainly not end here, since she and Lyle share so many of the same personality traits – science, flight and inventions!

But two more Strong Women wait in the wings for their lives to become filled with excitement, romance and a dash of danger! Here’s a peek at Volume Two...

Excerpt: Miss Elkins and the Invisible Horse

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"He's beautiful, isn't he, Thomas?"

That question, issued on a sigh of delight, came from the lips of Miss Aurelia Elkins as she leaned against the paddock fence and watched the young black foal galloping across the grass and kicking his heels.

"Aye, he is that, Miss," replied the elderly man standing next to her. One muddy boot hooked over the bottom railing, while his chin rested on his folded arms.

Tiny Thomas lived up to his name. Or down to it, as the case might be.

One thing was certain. Thomas knew horses, and hardly anyone else measured up in that regard as far as he was concerned. The only exception was at his side in the sunshine, sharing his pleasure at watching the antics of the latest addition to the Withersham stables.

Officially registered as Dark Dancer, out of Black Dandy and Marguerite Dawn—but known by all as Pip—the foal had made his debut in London several months ago, to the delight of his owner, Rowland, Earl Withersham. The Treadwell Vale stables had an acceptable reputation in racing circles but hadn't had a standout animal in more than a few generations.

This lad, Aurelia knew, was destined for greatness.

"He's going to be a winner," she declared, tossing a quick smile to the man next to her. "And you, as head groom, are going to be able to see him grow into his prime."

"Makin' predictions, now, are we?" He grinned at her. "But I'll not wager agin' ye, Missy."

Since he'd known Aurelia for many years, the familiarity was natural and warmed her heart. "Good. That means you know I'm right." She turned away from the field and leaned her back against the fence, enjoying the late summer sunshine. "Marguerite is doing well?"

"Every inch of her the proud mama. Loves her boy, she does."

As if she heard her name, a mare strolled over to them, her gentle eyes gleaming, her body and mane shining. She walked as if she knew just how lovely she was.

"There's a girl then." Thomas's hand was out already, stroking the velvet soft nose. "How's my special lady today, eh?"

Marguerite nudged him affectionately.

"She is your girl, isn't she," remarked Aurelia. "Look at the love in

those eyes."

"Aye. I birthed her, and I reckon she remembers. Took to each other right away, we did."

Marguerite decided to say hullo to Aurelia and moved forward to her, bringing her elegant nose closed to Aurelia's ear.

"Ah, my darling." How could she not put a quick kiss on the perfect white strip running down from those mobile ears to just above her lips? "You're looking fine today, and your boy is just wonderful. Clever girl."

Marguerite nudged her a little more forcefully.

"And you know I have an apple." Aurelia reached into her pocket. "There's no hiding anything from you, is there?"

"She can smell 'em from across the paddock, I swear," chuckled Thomas.

"Here you are, then. I have another, but I'm saving that for your lad, Pip."

The two of them watched Marguerite savouring her treat. Within moments her son decided to investigate, was rewarded with an apple of his own, and the two horses crunched happily in the sunshine.

It was a golden moment for Aurelia, seeing these two beautiful creatures sharing their delight, unafraid, intelligent and…in her mind, just perfect.

Someone else thought so, too.

"Well, if that isn't just the loveliest sight." Rowland Treadwell, Earl Withersham, walked around the corner of the barn, smiling broadly.

"Hullo Rowland." Aurelia smiled back. "I'm taking shameless advantage of your horses and Thomas's time, this morning."

"You know you can do both of those whenever you want, Aurelia." He came to stand beside her, giving both Marguerite and Pip a pat and a warm caress. "With both of these."

"This lovely lady is special, that's for sure." She straightened Marguerite's mane over her forehead. "But it's Pip that we'll have to watch. He is going to be extraordinary, Rowland." She turned to him. "I just know it. I have that feeling about him."

Rowland nodded. "I agree." He lifted his head and let the wind tease his hair. Never a stickler for convention, he seldom wore hats, and Aurelia was glad of it. The sun brought out the reddish gold highlights and the tousled mass shone bright as a coin.

She did what she always did around Rowland.

She admired, enjoyed, and smiled.

Available soon at Amazon.com, and you can read for free with your Kindle Unlimited subscription.

Volume Three is also on the way. Here's look at how it begins...

Excerpt: Lady Imelda's Latest Novel

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"What do you mean you've never read any of my books?"

Lady Imelda Eastchurch, only child of the Duke and Duchess of Vernon, cast a scornful glare at Mr Dynar Brightstone, who remained supremely unmoved.

"Just what I said," he answered. "I don't read novels. Especially not romantic novels, where the heroine is a silly girl, and the hero has to rescue her from the perils her own stupidity got her into."

Imelda managed not to gnash her teeth, but it was a near thing. "Not all novels are as you describe," she countered. "In fact, I like to think my heroines are, mostly, smarter than my heroes."

A fair eyebrow rose over dark, dark eyes. "Really?"

The drawled word of disbelief rankled. "Yes, really." She straightened her spine. "If you persist in this ridiculous nonsense, Mr Brightstone, we shall have to part ways this instant."

"I thought you wanted a ride in my auto-carriage."

Silence fell for a few long moments.

"Damn you."

Dynar chuckled. "Let that be a lesson to you. Never argue or make threats when you want something from someone. Wait until after you've got it. Then throw insults as far as you wish."

"You have an odd way of viewing the world, Dynar." Imelda looked up at him. "I will say, on a personal note, that I like the fact you're taller than most. It's seldom I can enjoy a walk with a partner whose legs are longer than mine."

"Thank you. I had nothing to do with it, but I appreciate the compliment."

"It was more of a statement of fact than a compliment, but that's quite all right. I suppose there really should be more compliments passed around, shouldn't there?"

Dynar's lips twitched. He was enjoying this walk more than he'd expected. "If that is truly your belief, then I should honour it, of course. As a gentleman must." He glanced down at her once more. "I would very much like to compliment you on your splendid breasts."

She missed a step. "Ah."

"I'm sad to have to point out that there isn't much of them on display at the moment, but one must observe the proprieties."

"Of course." She struggled.

He swore he could hear her teeth grinding together and laughed. "You are a delight, Imelda."

“And you’re a rogue and a dreadful tease,” she retorted. “I have no idea why I’m accompanying you.” A pause followed. “Except, of course, for the fact that you’re going to let me drive your auto-carriage.”

“Whoa.” He straightened. “I said I would give you a ride. *Not*… listen carefully…*not* allow you to drive the thing.”

He could almost hear the gears in her mind churning at his statement, and waited with interest for her response.

“Are ladies prohibited from owning their own auto-carriages, d’you know?”

He sighed and barely managed to avoid rolling his eyes. “I have no idea. Do not buy one to spite me.”

Her chin went up. “As if I would make such an expensive purchase just to spite you, Dynar. What a ninnyhammer you must think me.”

He snorted. “I’d be a ninnyhammer to underestimate you, Imelda. I do not intend to make that mistake.”

“Good. I’m most pleased to hear it.” She nodded approvingly.

Once again, he tried not to laugh. “I will say, however, that walking with you is quite entertaining.”

Her nose went up and her voice cooled. “I’m glad you think so. One does try to keep one’s companion amused.”

“And since I don’t believe you have been crowned Queen yet, I venture to say that it is quite all right for you to remove the large icicle that someone has apparently rammed up your delectable arse.”

At that, she not only missed a step, but stumbled. He clung tightly to her arm, keeping her on her feet, but the face she turned to him was a mixture of stunned surprise, and what he believed was a desperate attempt not to burst out laughing.

He had to admire the rapidity with which she regained the power of speech.

“You…” she sputtered. “You are a terrible man with a shockingly dreadful mouth on you.”

“Dear girl, you know nothing about my mouth.” He swept his gaze over her body. “Yet.”

Available soon at Amazon.com, and you can read for free with your Kindle Unlimited subscription.

About the Author

British born and bred, Sahara Kelly has enjoyed writing and reading Regency romances for many decades, beginning in her childhood with books by Jane Austen, Georgette Heyer and Barbara Cartland.

Arriving in America with her almost-complete collection of Leslie Charteris' Saint novels, all the original James Bonds, and a passion for Monty Python, Sahara's new life eventually expanded to include a husband, offspring, citizenship, and a certain amount of acclimation to her new surroundings.

She never quite managed to attain a level of comfort with the American way of spelling, however, and creating a Regency novel offers challenges in that regard. So you'll see words that British readers will recognize, but American readers might perhaps find unusual. It's a choice… should one write an English romance using English spelling? Sahara has come around to that belief. She can now enjoy the extra "u" which has always seemed so colourful…

After more than two decades of writing, Sahara is now enjoying the greater freedom offered to authors by the rapidly expanding self-publishing scene and looking forward to many more such experiences.

Being freed of external controlling restraints has opened doors—for Sahara and many other writers. There are now no impediments; no obstructions barring the path from writer to reader. Which is, in many ways, exactly as originally intended when that first storyteller sat on a rock outside her cave, tugged her bearskin around her shoulders and smiled at her kids across the open fire with the words "Once upon a time..." (or however it sounded several million years ago.)

To find out more about Sahara Kelly and her writing, please drop by her website and visit her at:

Sahara Kelly's website

This is where Sahara shares none of the intimate details of her life but will present you with a list of books she'd like you to buy so that she can go do research on a beach in Aruba and be pampered with massages accompanied by drinks with umbrellas in them. She'll send you a postcard. Thank you.

When not dreaming of lazing on tropical beaches, Sahara has a modestly active social presence on the Internet. Take a look:

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